

How to Be Spiritually Strong Series

The Weapon of Righteousness (Eph. 6:14)

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These sermon study notes are designed to be a tool used after listening to the sermon. This resource is a guide to help deepen understanding regarding the Scriptures and ideas presented in the sermon. Those who use these study notes are encouraged to look up, read through, and think about Scripture references in this guide. There is more information in these notes than what is presented in the sermon. These study notes are designed to be used as an independent study tool to help the formation of Biblical convictions, character, and conduct.

The Weapon of Righteousness

I. Introduction

A. Illustration: Desire for Righteousness

1. When I was working outside the church in a distribution center, I worked with a young man who had grown up in a Christian home but had since rejected Christianity. He had been out of college for a few years, had a degree in philosophy, and proclaimed himself an atheist.
2. We had several spiritual conversations on a range of topics. My coworker would throw out challenge after challenge. I would respond to the criticism of Christianity that he raised, challenge his views as well, and he would bring up another one. Then we would go round and round. I genuinely enjoy these conversations.
3. While we were having these conversations, something else was also going on. My coworker was very polite and respectful during our spiritual conversations, but in between these conversations, he would intentionally say and do things trying to get me upset. His actions and words were so direct and obvious, it became clear that he was purposefully trying to make me angry so that I would react.
4. The most likely intention behind these exchanges was to cause me to explode in anger so that Christianity could be criticized and “exposed” as being fraudulent. At one point, his antagonism became so bad that I told him I was frustrated with the way he was treating me. He refused to stop, so I said, “I’m not trying to be rude, but I’m walking away.” I turned and left. My coworker then followed two steps behind me across the warehouse. I didn’t react the way he wanted me to.
5. I haven’t been in a lot of situations like that in my life. That situation was one of the most direct forms of persecution I’ve ever experienced, which means overall, I’ve had it pretty easy so far.

B. I want to live righteously in every situation God puts me in, even the difficult and uncomfortable ones. I hope to act in a righteous way even when my rights are violated, if I’m imprisoned, if I’m tortured, and if I’m allowed to give my life for Jesus. No matter how difficult the situation is, I want to act righteously. I hope to go even further than just acting in a righteous way; I want to have righteous character in those situations as well. I have failed to reach my goal on many occasions, so I keep working on it.

C. Finding real life examples in which righteousness functions as a spiritual weapon can be difficult to discern because we don’t always know the contribution righteousness makes. However, in this case, it was obvious. If I had reacted in anger, if I had lashed out due to frustration, if I had responded in kind, Jesus would have been dishonored.

D. In Ephesians 6:14, the second weapon in our spiritual battle is righteousness. Righteousness is a resource given to disciples by God in order for them to have spiritual strength and protection. We will start by clarifying what righteousness is, look at how it is used as a spiritual weapon, and finish with some practical ways righteousness can be put on. Here is what Paul says, ¹⁴

Stand firm therefore, HAVING GIRDED YOUR LOINS WITH TRUTH, and HAVING PUT ON THE BREASTPLATE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS,” (Eph. 6:14).

II. Understanding Righteousness

- A. The second spiritual weapon given to us through the Holy Spirit for developing and maintaining our soul strength is, “having put on the breastplate of righteousness” (v. 14).¹ Righteousness is a resource given to disciples by God for their good. However, like the previous weapon, what exactly is meant here by righteousness is not immediately obvious. Righteousness is commanded by God for every disciple (2 Tim. 2:22) and, according to Jesus, it ought to be our life’s highest priority (Mt. 6:33).² In other words, pursuing righteousness is a really big deal to God. Developing and maintaining a life of righteousness is central to the Christian life and a high priority for true disciples.
- B. Regarding the weapon of righteousness, we run into the same interpretive question as the previous one—the weapon of truth. Does Paul mean righteousness in the objective or the subjective way, or both? Objectively, righteousness could be referring to the righteousness given to disciples by Jesus, which clears up their moral and legal record with God; theologians call this righteousness justification (“imputed righteousness”). The subjective use of righteousness corresponds to the righteousness by which disciples actually live their lives; it is their righteous living and actions; theologians call this righteousness sanctification (“imparted righteousness”). Is Paul referring to one or the other, or both? The most convincing answer is that Paul is referring to imparted righteousness, sanctification, or a righteous lifestyle.³
- C. This is a good opportunity to teach a few helpful and basic Bible study skills. If there is ever a question as to what a word or statement means in the Bible, a good approach to figuring it out is to look carefully at the immediate context—the ideas and flow of thought just before and after the word or statement. Next, looking at how the same author uses the word or statement in the same document (book) is the next step that can help add clarity. If there still isn’t a lot of other material to go on, studying how the same author uses the word or statement in their other writings can help provide clarity. If uncertainty remains, searching through the rest of the Bible for passages that may help interpret the unclarified word or statement may be the way to go, as Scripture is the best interpretation of Scripture. Looking for more information with which to understand an ambiguous or vague word, statement, or idea begins closest to the text in question and expands out from there. This can be done using a concordance (Bible study tool that lists all the places where all the words of the Bible are used—some are based on the original languages) or by skim reading.
- D. In this passage, every reference where the word used for “righteousness” appears in the book of Ephesians, in the rest of Paul’s writings, in the words and teachings of Jesus, and finally in the

¹ The background reference that Paul drew this imagery from was probably Isa. 59:17 as well as the current Roman soldier’s armor.

² Heb. 12:14

³ The strongest reason for this assessment is that it would be odd for Paul to tell the disciples to take up what they have already been given (Eph. 1:13-14, 4:24, 5:9-10). Since Paul clearly thinks these disciples have already been justified before God, he is likely referring to sanctification here. Further, Paul spent a significant amount of time explaining what he meant by righteous living throughout this letter including chapter 4 in particular. This explanation fits the overall context of Ephesians much better than the alternative.

rest of the New Testament, was looked up in that order. All this was done in the hope of coming to a better understanding of what Paul meant when he refers to the “breastplate of righteousness”. Here’s what was learned about righteousness in this study. In the most general explanation, the New Testament understands righteousness in three different ways.

Righteousness is a spiritual condition a person has before God. Often, it is thought of in legal terms. Those who are considered in a right legal standing before God, as having fulfilled His moral standards, through trust in God or accepting Jesus for who He claimed to be, which are based on His own character are righteous.⁴ Individuals are righteous when they have been restored to God and are part of His spiritually adopted people (Rm. 4:3, 4:5, 4:6, 4:9, 4:11, 4:22, 5:17, 10:10, Phil. 3:9, Mt. 5:45, 9:13, 13:43, 13:49, 25:46, Mk. 2:17, Lk. 5:32, 15:7, Jas. 2:23, 1 Jn. 2:29, 3:10). When this happens as an act of God (1 Cor. 1:30), the person sets their life direction after the moral standards of God’s Word as a result (Rm. 8:10, 6:13).

- E. Second, to be righteous is to be a person who possesses the character trait of righteousness which is who God is in Himself (Rm. 1:17, 10:3, Mt. 5:6, 25:37, Jn. 17:25, Ac. 24:25, Eph. 4:24, 5:9, Heb. 1:9, 12:11, 1 Jn. 3:7, 2 Pet. 1:1). A righteous person is someone whose character is righteous. These people desire, love, have the ability to act on, and have developed the habit of living by God’s moral standards. Their internal disposition naturally takes them toward what God says is good and what pleases Him. People who have this character trait inside them due to the work of the Holy Spirit are righteous.
- F. The third and final way righteousness is understood is that a person who is considered righteous in their spiritual condition which results in the development of righteous character will also perform acts of righteousness in their behavior (Rm. 6:13, 6:16, Mt. 6:1, Ac. 10:35, Heb. 11:33, 1 Jn. 3:7). All of us act according to our character and nature (Rev. 22:11). Those who act in ways that fulfill God’s moral standards are righteous. Instead of lying, people will tell the truth; instead of acting out in anger they will be patient; instead of stealing, they will work with their own hands, etc. However, just because a person does the right action doesn’t necessarily mean it is a righteous act, since genuinely righteous acts will always be connected to righteous character, which comes from a righteous standing with God.
- G. All three ways of referring to righteousness are connected. A person has or develops righteous character because they belong to God. Those who are unrighteous are that way in their character because they are separated from God. The person who does righteous acts does so because they have righteous character. People act in unrighteous ways because their actions are the consequence of their unrighteous character. Every element of righteousness influences the others. The person who lives with a righteous lifestyle does so because they are connected to God, and He is righteous (1 Jn. 2:29).
- H. Are you convinced that living a righteous and moral life according to the standards of God matters? There is a tendency today to minimize the importance of righteousness for the sake of elevating grace. There are Christians who think if their immoral actions don’t result in the punishment of hell, our moral failures don’t matter. Righteousness is practically irrelevant as

⁴ Logos 10 Bible Study Software Exegetical Guide on Ephesians 6:14 “righteousness”

long as a person has faith in Jesus. No matter the amount of sin in our life, it will not be punished in hell; therefore, violations of God’s moral standards make no meaningful difference in my life. My sins are covered by grace. Apparently, the only thing we care about is getting to heaven. I know, because I thought this way for a long time, too—this is not meant to be a criticism, but a critique. This way of thinking is not only incorrect, it causes us to devalue the importance of and motivation for righteousness.

- I. Another habit of thinking that diminishes the important role of righteousness in the Christian life is what we tell ourselves to make ourselves feel better when we stumble and fall: “nobody’s perfect”, “we’re only human”, “it is impossible to live like Jesus anyway”, “at least I’m better than...”, etc. While all these statements are true, it doesn’t remove our responsibility to pursue a life of righteousness. Instead, we should forget the failures of the past and press on, which is the attitude of those who are spiritually mature (Phil. 3:8-16). Just because we will never be perfectly righteous does not mean righteousness is somehow unimportant.
- J. The reality is, every time we disobey or rebel against God’s moral standards, disciples grieve the Holy Spirit, hurt the heart of God, hurt ourselves and others, and dishonor God, among other negative consequences. Every violation of God’s good moral standards is harmful, even if it doesn’t ultimately cause a person to be punished with hell. Sin always goes against the nature of who we are in Jesus, and it makes a difference in our lives. Remember, our character and our actions reflect our spiritual condition before God. If a person lives consistently contrary to God’s ways, they demonstrate they don’t belong to God and have no assurance of reaching heaven. Those who belong to God are transformed to be like Jesus.

III. The Weapon of Righteousness

- A. According to the apostle Paul, living a righteous lifestyle provides spiritual strength and protection. The weapon of righteousness works in a number of ways, which can be discovered throughout the Bible. What follows are two of the primary ways a righteous lifestyle functions as a source of spiritual strength and protection—a weapon available in the spiritual battle.
- B. The first example of the weapon of righteousness comes from the life of Daniel. As we will see through Daniel, those who may want to hurt us can and will look for an opportunity to do so if we live in an unrighteous way. Daniel was living in a culture that was hostile toward His convictions and lifestyle as a Jew. Daniel had to constantly navigate difficult situations in order to be faithful to God without compromise. Daniel lived a life of righteousness and it ended up protecting him, unknowingly even, from those who wanted to cause him harm.
- C. In Daniel 6 we read what Daniel’s enemies wanted to do:

⁴ Then the commissioners and satraps began trying to find a ground of accusation against Daniel in regard to government affairs; but they could find no ground of accusation or *evidence of corruption*, inasmuch as he was faithful, and no negligence or corruption was *to be* found in him. ⁵ Then these men said, “We will not find any ground of accusation against this Daniel unless we find *it* against him with regard to the law of his God.” (Dan. 6:4-5)
- D. People are trying to harm Daniel by accusing him of wrongdoing related to his job. Even though these individuals were looking carefully, Daniel lived a life of integrity, so they have no grounds

of hurting Him. Daniel's righteous life protected him against the enemies' attacks.⁵ It was only when Daniel's devotion to God got him in trouble that the enemies were able to hurt Daniel. A life of righteousness protects the people of God against accusations of immoral behavior.

- E. The second example of how righteousness can be used as a spiritual weapon comes into play when we understand how our desires work. The desires we feed become stronger over time. The disciple's choice is to either feed the Spirit or to feed our corrupt desires (called the flesh). If, by our choices and actions, we feed desires that are not good for us, those desires will grow and we will decrease our strength for resisting those desires, and may even be mastered by them by being overcome to the point where these desires control us.⁶ It is possible for bad desires to overpower our will so that even if we don't want to indulge a certain desire, we might feel powerless to stop it. This is what it looks like to live a spiritually weak lifestyle.
- F. On the other hand, if by our decisions, habits, and actions we feed the Holy Spirit who is in us, the disciple will gain the strength they need to resist the corrupt desires they have in them. The fruit of the Spirit grows stronger while the desires of the flesh grow weak, thereby enabling the disciple to live a spiritually strong life.⁷ Paul explains how this works in Galatians chapter 5:
- ¹⁶ But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. ¹⁷ For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please. ¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law. ¹⁹ Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, ²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, ²¹ envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. ²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. ²⁴ Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵ If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. (Gal. 5:16-25)⁸
- G. These same principles are at work not just concerning the enemy that is in us, but also the enemies that are outside us as well. To be led by the Spirit is to be living a righteous life (Rm. 8:10-16). A righteous lifestyle causes good desires to grow and bad desires to lose their strength. Both these simultaneous benefits of righteousness result in greater spiritual strength.
- H. In Daniel, we see righteousness as a spiritual weapon providing protection, and in Galatians, we see righteousness providing spiritual strength. These are the two primary ways that righteousness functions as a spiritual weapon.

⁵ While protection is provided through righteousness, we might also have to suffer for the sake of righteousness too (1 Pet. 3:14).

⁶ Those that live according to the desires can find that these desires are never satisfied no matter how much they are indulged. Paul points this reality out in the lives of those who live for their own desires in Eph. 4:19.

⁷ The flesh is always present in us and can gain strength and momentum in our lives when we begin to feed its desires again. Spiritual strength is something that is managed not conquered. We always have to keep an eye on it and do the right things in order to be spiritually strong in the Spirit and weak in the flesh.

⁸ Rm. 6:19

- I. Every true disciple will take on the responsibility and duty to work at maintaining a life of holiness and righteousness at all times.⁹ Those who truly belong to God will long and work for righteous character and the ability to, as consistently as possible, carry out what is good in every action they perform. While this is something disciples progressively grow in for the rest of their lives, the general orientation and movement toward the moral standards of God demonstrate that they are righteous because they belong to God and are no longer at odds with Him. Is pursuing righteousness a desire and priority for you?
- J. Disciples who are led by and living in the Holy Spirit will value and pursue righteousness. They will work hand in hand with the Spirit to develop the character appropriate to being a child of God, which then influences and impacts the way they act day to day. Morality matters. The decisions we make matter. The character we develop matters. The habits we live with matter. All these demonstrate one of two realities: either our lives prove we belong to God, or our lives prove we are living in rebellion against God. Those who think sin is no big deal or who constantly accept moral failures don't understand the significance of righteousness and its importance when it comes to our spiritual condition. Our spiritual condition before God is put on display for all to see through our actions.
- K. Disciples learn to repent quickly and get right with God again in short order when they stumble in maintaining a righteous lifestyle. Sitting in sin goes against the very nature of the disciple—it will disturb them and their sense of peace. Living in seasons of sin or having an area of life that is out of order compared to what disciples know God wants from them will bother the conscience of a follower of Jesus. They can't remain comfortable in intentionally living a lifestyle that is contrary to the righteous moral standards of God. The disciple will struggle, fight, and claw their way to living a life consistent with God's righteous character, even if it means getting help from others. A disciple can't consistently, or even periodically, be comfortable with getting drunk on the weekends, going around gossiping and speaking negatively about others, having angry outbursts when they are frustrated, living in repeated sexual sin, or regularly neglecting the things of God. Disciples have a heart that pursues righteous living.

IV. How to Put on Righteousness

- A. How do disciples intentionally pursue righteousness, or as Paul phrases it, "put on" (v. 14) righteousness? Practically, in our day-to-day living, what does putting on righteousness look like? The Bible provides a list of ways this can be done, and some of the methods for doing so will only briefly be mentioned here.
- B. Jesus says those who have a strong desire for righteousness will be satisfied with it (Mt. 5:6). God gives the character trait of righteousness to those who recognize their need for it, God's help, and who strongly desire it. God is ultimately the One who causes our righteousness to increase (2 Cor. 9:10). Those who value and seek after righteousness will be satisfied by God.

⁹ William Gurnall and John Campbell, [*The Christian in Complete Armour*](#) (London: Thomas Tegg, 1845), 295.

- C. Another motivation in the pursuit of righteousness is not just to want to possess it, but to love it as well—as Jesus did (Heb. 1:9). Cherishing righteousness and having an affection for it is a heart condition that moves God to share His righteousness with us.
- D. Understanding righteousness and having an accurate perspective of what it is through the example of Jesus (Jn. 16:10) can lead to developing it. Paying attention to the life of Jesus inspires us to live the same way and develop righteousness in our lives.
- E. Putting on righteousness involves submitting ourselves to God’s righteousness (Rm. 10:3). This means a person who wants to develop a righteous lifestyle will not pursue what they think is right, but what God says is right. These individuals align themselves under God in how an upright, moral life is defined.
- F. Regularly acting in obedience results in greater depths of righteousness (Rm. 6:16). Obedience nourishes righteousness. The more steps of obedience a person takes, the more they will develop righteousness. Heart obedience, even when our obedience in action fails, in the long run will lead to righteousness growing in our life.
- G. Using the weapons of righteousness (2 Cor. 6:7) helps us live in righteousness. God gives His people resources and tools to use in order to live the type of life He desires and commands. Using these resources the way God outlines increases our personal righteousness.
- H. Becoming the person God has created us to be (called the new self) will result in righteousness (Eph. 4:24). By growing in the new person God created us to be, we become like God, take on His nature, and become righteous.
- I. Since righteousness is produced by Jesus and the Spirit (Eph. 5:9, Rm. 14:17, Phil. 1:11), the more we depend on them, the greater our righteousness will become. Without a dependent attitude, if we try to develop righteousness by our own power, we will not reach it.
- J. Using the Word of God as God intended it to be used trains us in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16, Heb. 5:13). When disciples allow the Bible to teach them about themselves and the world, show us where we are in the wrong, tell us how to fix what is wrong, and cultivate our mind and morals according to God’s standards, we will become righteous.
- K. Righteousness is also developed from the discipline of God (Heb. 12:11). Openly accepting God’s corrective hand, whether in the circumstances of our lives, the confrontation of other people, or God’s direct intervention, produces righteousness in us.
- L. Growing in wisdom leads to greater righteousness (Jas. 3:17-18). Wisdom is the seed from which righteousness grows. Foolishness leads to unrighteousness. Righteousness and wisdom are found together, and as each one increases, so does the other.
- M. This list provides a good introduction to the ways righteousness can be developed in our lives.

V. Conclusion

- A. Righteousness is important to God, and it is central to the Christian life. According to Jesus, pursuing a righteous life should be the highest priority, along with the kingdom of God, in the life of a disciple. When disciples live with this focus, God will take care of everything else.
- B. Not only is developing a life of righteousness deeply significant, but it is also spiritually good for our soul as it provides both protection and strength. Righteousness allows us to sidestep enemy

attacks and develop the strength to do more consistently what is right. Be encouraged to value, love, desire, and intentionally chase after righteousness.

VI. Questions for Further Thought

- A. Has there ever been a time when doing what God wanted either protected you from harm or caused you to suffer negative consequences? If so, when?
- B. Even when disciples are forced to suffer for the sake of righteousness, what encouragement does Jesus provide (Mt. 5:10-12)?
- C. How is the value, role, or practical benefits of righteousness diminished in the way we think?
- D. What can cause us to resist the pursuit and development of righteousness in our lives?
- E. What three action steps can you take to put on righteousness?