

Sermon ✝ August 22, 2021
Ephesians 6:10-20
Frank Maxwell

A woman tells how as a child she used to visit her grandmother's house. One of the things that she noticed in a very prominent place in the grandmother's bedroom was a suitcase. One day she asked her grandmother what was in the suitcase and was told that it contained her burial clothes. She explained that she wanted to be sure, if sudden death came, that the proper clothes would be handy before she was placed in her coffin. Literally, her grandmother had packed her bag for eternity.

So it begs the question, *Is your bag packed for eternity?* I'm not asking if there is a suitcase in your bedroom packed with burial clothes. But how are we living our lives? And when our time comes, *and it will*, what will be said of us? In other words, are we living the kind of life that God would have us live?

If not, in today's lesson from Ephesians, Paul suggests some clothes . . . or more precisely some positive traits . . . that we should be packing in our bags . . . attributes that will help us to live as God's people. Let's look at a couple of the things that Paul suggest we pack in our bag:

First: *"Fasten the belt of truth around your waist."* Truth seems to be in short supply these days. One pollster reported recently that 68 percent of the American people believe that in these past few years they have been consistently lied to by their leaders . . . political . . . corporate . . . you name it. If there is one thing that many people feel is inexcusable, it is to be lied to, especially by people in positions of authority.

As the story is told, Mahatma Gandhi of India had taken a stand on a certain issue. Some of his followers said to him, *"You have compromised on different issues in the past; why don't you compromise on this issue?"* Apparently he felt very strongly about this particular issue because he answered, *"You cannot compromise with truth."* So pack that belt of truth in your bag.

"Put on the breastplate of righteousness." In other words, adhere to moral principles. The greatness of a nation . . . of a people is measured not in the size of their military, not in their gross national product, not in the size of factories, and not in the width and length and extent of their corn fields. As a nation, greatness is measured because of the righteousness, the honesty, and the integrity of its citizens. And to remain a great nation in the third century of our existence, it must *not be* because of how big we are but of how good we are. Make room for the breastplate of righteousness in your bag.

There is a third thing that Paul suggests we ought to be wearing: *"As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace."* A Reader's Digest article from some time back was entitled, *"You Are As Young As Your Feet."* The article reported that some of our physical disabilities are the result of something that is wrong with our feet.

For instance, people sometimes complain of back trouble; this article says that the real problem may not be back trouble but foot trouble. The article pointed out that the Tower of Pisa leans not because of its structure but because of its shifted foundation.

Saint Paul says that the shoes on our feet should be the gospel of peace. Yet how difficult it is to achieve personal peace in the fast-paced, hectic world in which we live.

A woman tells of being in a crowded supermarket. A hectic looking father was pushing one of the carts with his little boy in the basket.

The boy was screaming and yelling; he was a real piece of work. The father kept saying calmly: *“Keep cool, Billy. Everything will be all right, Billy. Keep calm, Billy.”*

A little later the woman saw the same man in another aisle, and the boy was worse than ever. The father was still saying: *“Keep cool, Billy. Keep calm, Billy.”*

The woman turned to him and said, *“Why don't you do something about it instead of just talking so soothingly to Billy?”* The man said: *“Madam, you don't understand. I'm Billy.”*

These days, the mantra for so many seems to be: *“Keep cool. Everything is going to be all right. Keep calm.”* In spite of it all, we know we cannot attain peace for ourselves.

A few Sundays ago, the lessons included the story of Jesus calming the storm on the Sea of Galilee. Certain they are going to perish at sea, the frantic disciples awaken Jesus who is sleeping in the stern of the boat. Jesus spoke to the wind and the waves and said, *“Peace, be still.”* A great calm came over the Sea of Galilee, and they made their way safely to shore.

Jesus is still saying, *“Peace, be still,”* to you and me amid the storms of life . . . especially during these strange times. As he says to us, *“Be calm,”* we discover an inner peace. Be sure to pack a pair of these shoes in your bag.

Then Paul suggests something else to put into our bag: *“With all of these, take the shield of faith . . .”* In mid 1970's, Pastor Harold Buell was on a European tour. While in Yugoslavia the tour guide, who confessed to being an atheist, contrasted the communism of Russia and the communism of Yugoslavia, and he was critical of Russian communism.

The guide said, *“Russia tried to get rid of religion, but they did not put anything in its place.”* Surprising words from an atheist. Even more surprising when the guide concluded by saying, *“People want to believe in something; they must have something to believe in.”* So, *“Take the shield of faith,”* in your bag as Paul says.

A final thing that we might pack in our bag is *“the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God.”* When German theologian, Martin Niemöller was Hitler's prisoner in a concentration camp, they took from him all of his possessions except his Bible. Following his release, Niemöller wrote: *“What did this book mean to me during the long and weary years of solitary confinement and then for the last four years at Dauchau? The word of God was simply everything to me, comfort and strength, guidance and hope, master of my days and companion of my nights, the bread that kept me from starvation and the water of life that refreshed my soul.”*

It is by reading the word of God . . . that we come to know the Spirit of God. I'm sure you can find room in your bag for a small Bible.

The scriptures remind us that no one knows the day nor the hour when the Son of Man will come. And, I'm certain that most of us hope it's a long way in the future. But how we live our lives between this life and the next matters. It is important to consider the words of Saint Paul as he suggests the things that we need to pack and the things that we need to wear as we prepare for this journey. So . . . if you need to . . . get packing.