

Sunday, July 23, 2023 am

CLOSER TO GOD (48)
Disciples of Christ (5)
Fighting the Good Fight

As we continue our 2022-23 theme, Closer to God, we have been addressing the subject of discipleship. Discipleship is an English word that describes the life of being a disciple (student/follower) of Jesus. Sometimes it is used to emphasize how we are not only to be growing as His disciples, but also we are to be trying to bring others into His number. Last week, we examined how a disciple is compared to an athlete that is committed to his/her sport. We made several comparisons between athletics and the Christian's committed life.

Today, we want to examine how the disciple of Jesus is like a soldier or warrior.

I. Soldiers in the Roman Empire

- a. During the first century, the Roman army was at its peak. They dominated the world of the Mediterranean with numbers, tactics and great discipline. Soldiers (legionnaires) would have been a substantial percentage of the population. We read of soldiers in Jerusalem (According to Josephus¹ and Tacitus², there were in Syria and Judea there were 3-4 legions of soldiers (each legion consisting of about 6000 soldiers at full strength)). The point is that throughout the empire, seeing soldiers was not uncommon. They would wear their uniforms and weaponry as they engaged in their everyday affairs, and train continually.
- b. With this as a backdrop, it is understandable how NT writers could use various aspects of the Roman soldier as an illustration for our spiritual warfare.

II. We are at war!

- a. *We are living in enemy territory* – Being a disciple of Jesus is a realization that we are living in a hostile world.
 - i. This world is not our home. 1 Peter 2:11 – we are sojourners and pilgrims.
 - ii. Philippians 3:20 – our citizenship is in heaven.
 - iii. This is a principle we must continually remind ourselves of.
- b. *We have an enemy* –
 - i. 1 Peter 5:8 – Satan, the devil, is our adversary.
 - ii. John 12:31 – he is the ruler of this world. 1 John 5:19 - The world lies under the sway of the wicked one.
 - iii. Sometimes, when we think of our enemies, we think of false religions, atheism, or a society that is hostile to God and our faith. We might think of the various ungodly and immoral practices that are not only done but are even tolerated by this world. We might even think of brethren who resist the truth and those teaching it. Certainly, these are ones who may cause us grief as we struggle to stand for truth. But they are all doing the will of Satan. Recall John 8:44 where Jesus was dealing with the hostile, Jewish leaders. He noted, “You are of your father, the devil...” 1 John 3:8 notes, “He who sins is of the devil, for the devil has sinned from the beginning.”
- c. *The nature of this war* –
 - i. Ephesians 6:10-13 remind us of the nature of this warfare. It is a spiritual battle.
 - ii. 2 Corinthians 10:3-5 this is a battle for the mind and soul. It is fighting temptation in our lives – Romans 13:14 – put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provisions... It is seeking souls to win them to Christ. It is working to bring back those who have wandered from the truth –

¹ Josephus, Flavius, and William Whiston. *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*. Hendrickson, 1987. Antiquities, 17:286.

² Tacitus, Cornelius. *The Annals, 4.5. Complete Works of Tacitus*. Tacitus. Alfred John Church. William Jackson Brodribb. Sara Bryant. edited for Perseus. New York. : Random House, Inc. Random House, Inc. reprinted 1942.

James 5:19-20, Galatians 6:1. It is doing what we can to make the world a better place, in line with God's will – NOT through legislation or hostilities, but by being godly examples and changing the environment around us 1 soul at a time.

III. Preparing for our battle

a. Training –

- i. One of the elements that made the 1st century Roman army so efficient was their continued training and preparedness.
- ii. That has not changed, when one enlists in the army they go through “boot camp” and then their specialty training. But even beyond that, throughout one's military career they are continually training – staying in shape (see last week), learning about their enemy, and honing their given skills to perfection.
- iii. 2 Timothy 2:15 calls for us to give diligence to present ourselves approved to God – able to accurately handle God's word. 1 John 4:1 calls for us “test the spirits”. You do that with God's word. Hebrews 5:12-14 – they were rebuked for not maturing as they should. Note vs. 14 which emphasizes maturity.
- iv. Last week, describing athletes, we discussed discipline and preparation. We could apply these to our preparedness for warfare as well.
- v. Lack of preparation and training keeps many from trying to reach others or maturing as they ought to. That is why as Christians, we must be continually growing in the grace and knowledge of our Lord – 2 Peter 3:18. We need regular and consistent study habits. We need one another to build each other up in the word (cf. Ephesians 4:11-16). We need Bible classes and proper worship. Etc.

b. The armor of God -

- i. Ephesians 6:10-18, Paul gives one final admonition to his audience in this letter. He talks about the battle we are engaged in and challenges us to put on the armor of God. After describing the nature of our battle, He proceeds to describe the various pieces of our “armor”.
- ii. Recall earlier in this lesson, we noted how people in the empire would have been used to seeing soldiers, likely in full dress and armed in their cities and towns. They would have recognized the various pieces of their uniform – their armor would have consisted of a helmet with extensions to protect the face, a breastplate (chest guard), a belt (or girdle) which protected their midsection – called a belt because it attached like one, but it had various pieces attached designed to protect and provide mobility when needed, sandals, and greaves (shin guards). They also carried a shield and their weapons – typically a two-edged sword or spear. They would also have a scarf and capes which served various utilitarian purposes.
- iii. Paul uses this analogy to describe OUR spiritual armor. Of course, just as our battle is spiritual, so is our “armor”. Paul compared some of the pieces of armor to qualities we need as Christians.
- iv. The armor of God consists of:
 1. Truth – girding our waist. The “belt” held everything in place to protect the mid-section. TRUTH holds us together. We need “the truth of the gospel”
 - a. Ephesians 1:13 – earlier in his letter he addressed that they trusted in Him after they heard the truth of the gospel.
 - b. John 17:17, Jesus prayed, “Sanctify them by Your truth, Your word is truth.”
 - c. 1 Peter 1:13 calls for us to “gird up the loins of your mind”
 2. Righteousness as our breastplate –a breastplate would protect the heart and other vital organs.
 - a. Righteousness is right living. It is about everything we do and do not do.

- b. Christians are obviously to pursue righteousness – Matthew 5:6 – we are to hunger and thirst for it. Romans 6:13 – we present ourselves to God as instruments of righteousness. Philippians 1:11 notes that we are to be filled with the fruits of righteousness.
 - c. In so doing, others will see Christ living and working in us – Matthew 5:16. This will also protect us from false charges by those in the camp of the enemy – cf. 1 Peter 2:11-12, 15-16, etc.
- 3. The gospel of peace shodding our feet – clearly the gospel is related to truth. The ONE TRUE gospel IS truth. But here the emphasis is “the gospel of peace”.
 - a. The gospel produces peace – with God (Romans 5:1), one another (Romans 14:19, 17; 2 Corinthians 13:11) and even within ourselves – Philippians 4:6-7
 - b. Our feet of shod with this – implying that we are TAKING THIS message to a world that needs it desperately. We know that the gospel is not something we are to keep to ourselves – 2 Corinthians 5:11, Matthew 28:19-20, cf. Acts 8:4, etc.
- 4. Faith as our shield – faith is a foundational quality as disciples of Jesus. Without faith, we CANNOT please God – Hebrews 11:6.
 - a. It is upon our faith that we build our Christian lives – 2 Peter 1:5ff.
 - b. Faith, like a shield is what will keep us going when we face trials and temptations. It keeps us from giving up or giving in. It is our victory that overcomes the world – 1 John 5:4
 - c. NOTE: The word for “shield” was a reference to the rectangular shield of a Roman soldier. About 4 ft high and 2½ feet wide. It was mobile and could be moved to the direction of the enemy. Satan is going to try and attack us from every angle. Our faith helps us sustain whatever attacks come our way. Is our faith flexible enough to trust God no matter what the circumstance is?
- 5. Hope of salvation as our helmet – why do we do what we do? Clearly there is a reason behind our sacrifices, endurance and service. We do it because we have a hope of heaven when this life is over.
 - a. Like the athlete’s prize, there is an anticipated reward in this battle. It is the SAME reward, but here we think in terms of ultimate victory.
 - b. 2 Timothy 4:7-8 – Paul had fought the good fight. 1 Timothy 6:12 – Paul tells Timothy to fight the good fight of faith and “*lay hold on eternal life.*”
 - c. 1 Thessalonians 5:8, *But let us who are of the day be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet the hope of salvation.*
- v. NOTE vs. 11 & 13 – we are to put on the WHOLE armor of God. TWICE Paul mentioned this.
 - 1. In an army EVERY piece of equipment and uniform is issued for a reason. If we leave off any part of it, we are vulnerable in one area or another.
 - 2. That is equally true in this spiritual battle. NOTICE how the Galatians 5:22-23 describes “the fruit of the Spirit” NOT “fruits of the Spirit”. ALL of the qualities need to be present. We cannot pick and choose which qualities of life we like and avoid the rest.
- vi. Ephesians 6:17 describes our offensive weapon.
 - 1. The sword described here was a personal sword that was 2 edges.
 - 2. Our “sword of the spirit” is the word of God. Hebrews 4:12 describes the word of God as sharper than any 2-edged sword. We need to use the word of God regularly so that we are ready to fight and defend our faith.

3. NOTE: This is the ONLY offensive weapon mentioned in our armory (or panoply).
- vii. Vs. 18 – “praying always” – we must not forget the importance of communication in “battle”. We need not fight this battle alone. God is with us but we need to turn to Him. Philippians 4:6 – “let your requests be made known...”

IV. Fighting the good fight

- a. As we have already noted, this is a spiritual battle. It is a battle for the mind and for souls – not just our minds, but the minds of others as well.
- b. *This is our priority.* 2 Timothy 2:4 - as we enlist in the Lord’s army, we must never forget that we belong to Him. Is that not the point we have emphasized in verses describing the disciple of Jesus – Luke 9:23-24, 14:26-28, 33? Consider also Luke 9:62 – no one having put his hands to the plow...
- c. *We have a commander –*
- i. Clearly, this is understood since we are disciples of Jesus. He is our commander in chief.
 - ii. 2 Timothy 2:3-4 notes that we seek to please Him who enlisted us.
 - iii. Hebrews 2:10 – He is described as “the captain of our salvation” (NKJV)
 - iv. Matthew 8:8-9, a centurion got this as he went to Jesus to have his servant healed by Jesus. He notes that all Jesus had to do was speak it would be done.
 - v. Jesus gives us instructions – will we follow them? Luke 6:46.
 - vi. Matthew 16:24 – we FOLLOW Him – He is leading us.
- d. *We are called to fight –* 1 Timothy 6:12
- i. Paul admonished Timothy to **fight** – be reminded that this is not a defensive posture, but a call to go and ENGAGE the enemy. Typically a battle or war is a matter of life or death. Fight to be victorious.
 - ii. **Wrestle** – Ephesians 6:12 – in describing our armor as noted, Paul said we wrestle against the spiritual forces of darkness (not flesh and blood). The word for wrestle means to grapple. Described as engaging in “hand to hand combat”. It is engaging and struggling. While fighting a battle from a distance is preferred (today think of missiles, jets and ships), to ultimately win a war requires “boots on the ground”. You have to engage the enemy head on. We think of wrestling in terms of sports – NOTE how it is “hand to hand”. A soldier is not fully trained until he is taught how to defend himself up close and personal. Apply that spiritually!
 - iii. **Resist** – 1 Peter 5:9. This is another word that indicates a struggle. Here we are defensively preventing our enemy from overcoming. When we face temptations, or whatever it might be, we have to STAND UP and push back. Do NOT give in.
 - iv. **Endure** – 2 Timothy 2:3. Fighting a war is NEVER an easy task. It usually involves GREAT sacrifice. If you survive, you may have to live on minimal resources if they are scarce. What causes a soldier to keep fighting when he is hungry, exhausted and maybe even injured? One reason is he believes in the cause. OR it might be so that he CAN survive. BOTH apply to our spiritual warfare. Galatians 6:9, Hebrews 10:36-39 – you have need of endurance.

And thus we can see the disciple of Jesus as a soldier in His army. We belong to Him and we fight for Him and His cause. The concept of a soldier reminds us that the way is not always easy. It is filled with challenges and “battles” that we must face. But if we are to receive our eternal reward, we must keep fighting. As Paul said in Romans 8:37, *Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.* IF we faithfully fight, NOTHING can separate us from His love or Him. What about you? Are you in the Lord’s army? Think about it!