

“Extreme Gospel Training”

First Presbyterian Church

Pastor Dave Carlson

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Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 59:14-19

New Testament Lesson: Ephesians 6:10-20

Many of you know that my mom, Dot, moved in with Yuri and I last September. (Hi Mom.) As much as we love having her and she loves living with us, mom wants a place of her own and plans to move to John Knox Village in the next month or two (thank goodness for move-in specials; makes it affordable for her).

And yet, even if you can manage to afford it, moving out on your own can be scary – for moms and dads in their golden years, for college students and recent graduate, for adult children still living at home.

In addition to concerns about the cost of living independently, senior citizens in particular have safety concerns. They can be a target of thieves, muggers and scam artists. That's why my mom learned kick boxing. No kidding. You don't want to be at the receiving end of a kick to you-know-where. Other seniors are learning – wait for it – Cane Fu. Not kung fu, but cane fu – using a cane for self-defense.

Cane fu was created by a man named – wait for it – Buck Buckmaster (you can't make this stuff up – Google it) Buck is the owner of Florida-based Revolutionary Martial Arts, which teaches self-defense to senior citizens. One of the classes is called “Extreme Cane” – it's true, Google it! Extreme Cane is very inventive, isn't it? And very useful, no doubt. Of course Buck is not the first person to come up with an inventive and useful form of self defense. Perhaps the first person to do so, and certainly the greatest, was Jesus.

Jesus taught his followers how to defend themselves against physical, spiritual, and emotional attacks. He taught them to apply the Word of God in their day-to-day lives, and particularly when facing challenges, struggles, and fears.

One of his followers, the Apostle Paul, learned first hand the power of Jesus' teachings. Of course, Jesus didn't teach “Extreme Cane;” he taught “Extreme Gospel.” And Paul, like all good followers of a master like Jesus, made it his mission to pass along what he learned.

Warning and encouraging the Christians of his day – and ours – Paul reminds us what we're facing as followers of Christ. He says, “... Our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”

Whether you personally believe in cosmic powers and evil forces – or on what level you believe – there's no doubt the Gospel we live and die by is under attack. And that the

danger is all around us and in us – in our own weakness and doubt. And that we often don't even recognize the danger until it's too late, until the country has lost touch with basic Christian values, until the family no longer bothers to come to church, until you or your brother or your friend has taken one too many drinks or popped too many pills or fallen into the darkness of pornography.

We need protection – and salvation – in this world, in our lives. Things like truth, righteousness, peace, faith, and the word of God matter! And it matters that they are slowly slipping out of fashion in society!

This is why it's so important for you to learn and follow the teachings of Jesus, as passed down to us today by Paul. We can't always recognize or discern when we're under attack. We're not always sure what's true and what's not, who's right and who's wrong, what's helpful and what's hurtful.

So now is the time for us to return to the basics, basic training in the Extreme Gospel self-defense course created and taught by Jesus.

Like any good self-defense technique, Extreme Gospel is mostly about knowing your surroundings and being prepared to deflect an attack. Extreme Gospel protection is something we always have with, just like the foot in kick boxing or the cane in cane-fu.

Paul describes our protection gear in terms of a Roman soldier's armor. But really, what he describes are the virtues that people take on and develop when they become a Christian.

Being a Christian means that you stand for the truth. "Stand therefore," says Paul, "and fasten the belt of truth around your waist...."

What does a belt do, besides hold up your pants? Belts help us to stand up straight and walk tall, and that was particularly true for Roman soldiers.

The "belt of truth" for us is the truth of the Gospel and truthfulness in general. It keeps us from giving in to misguided, worldly beliefs, beliefs like might makes right, money and power is king, and looking after No. 1 is job one, even at the cost of telling lies, cheating, or falling in with the wrong crowd.

Be a stand for the truth in your life, and in the lives of those you love and care about. Don't let yourself wiggle out of what you know is right, and help others to make right choices in their lives.

It's like the guy who was coming out of church one day, and the preacher was standing at the door to shake hands. He grabbed the man by the hand and pulled him close. "You need to join the Army of the Lord!" he said. The man quickly replied, "I'm already in the Army of the Lord, Pastor." "How come I don't see you except at Christmas and Easter?" he asked. The man whispered back, "I'm in the secret service."

We can be as smart and clever as anything, but if we don't take a stand for the truth, we're heading for trouble. The truth of the gospel is what enables us to detect all the untruths we are bombarded with every day.

In addition to the "belt of truth, Paul tells us to "... put on the breastplate of righteousness." The "breastplate of righteousness" is what protects our heart. A deep inner sense of right and wrong keeps us from giving into temptation. We know when something is just not right, even if we can't put our finger on it. We don't have to know or prove the truth in our minds – or in the minds of others. We just have to know and follow the truth in our heart.

Protect that inner sense of right and wrong. You know Jesus in your heart. Use that inner knowledge to measure and take stock of the world around you, remembering who Jesus is and what he teaches.

Next, says Paul, "As shoes for your feet, put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace." Shoes are what we wear to go outside. We're supposed to take our faith out into the world, proclaim a peace in God that passes all understanding, but which is available to us through our knowledge and love of God.

For instance, during the Civil War, people didn't understand President Lincoln's vision for peace. He was criticized for speaking about compassion and kindness for the Southern rebels who were captured. "The Confederates were the enemy," argued his critics, "and they should be destroyed." But Lincoln wisely responded, "Do I not destroy my enemies, when I make them my friends."

Whether the Gospel comes under attack by other willfully or out of ignorance, our calling is to courageously defend the Gospel by actively sharing the faith, even with those and especially with those we might consider enemies. We are to go out of our way – out of our homes – to increasing the number of people who know and love Jesus, and who are willing to come alongside a community of faith like this one to help build up God's kingdom. God's vision.

Next Paul says, "... Take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one." Here, Paul is making reference to a wall of shields that protects many people. When the enemies of Rome would shoot a hailstorm of flaming arrows down upon the Roman soldiers, they would gather behind their body-length shields shoulder to shoulder, creating a protective wall.

The same is true of our faith, which Paul calls the "shield of faith." Our faith is something we hold in common. If your faith is wavering or uncertain, stand behind my faith or his faith or her faith. That'll get you through whatever is threatening you.

Do you see how this Extreme Gospel self-defense course can help you in life – help you know and defend the truth as God sees it, maintain a keen sense of right and wrong as God

knows it, and share the faith so that the world has more godly people, people ready and willing to build up the faith and secure its place as a cornerstone of society?

We are called to stand strong under what Paul calls “the helmet of salvation,” secure behind “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.” Worry, fatigue, fear, and temptation may attack us physically, but they can never defeat us spiritually! Tomorrow is always another day to advance the cause and further our God-given purpose.

No matter how dire things may seem – in your home life, in your job or daily calling, and in this world – we have the assurance that God is out ahead of us, and that in Christ, God has already won the victory. Ours is but to keep the faith, -protect it- share it with others, and stand strong as followers of Christ. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Lord, we thank you that you never ask us to do anything without equipping us to respond and act.

You instill in us the gift of faith, which allows us to trust you, rather than our circumstances.

You give us your word in scripture, which illuminates our path with truth.

You give us your Spirit to empower us, guide us and intercede on our behalf.

You give us the gift of salvation, which grants us the grace of your continual presence.

Thank you for these abundant and generous gifts. May we use them to your glory and share them with those in need.

We pray particularly, Lord, your presence and your healing touch upon all those we know -- and those known only to you -- who are in particular need at this time.

We pray all this and more, as we join together in the prayer that you taught us, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.**

**Thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.**

**Give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.**

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.