

## Fully Loaded

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“Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.” – Romans 13:12

When I asked Robert, the church secretary, what came to his mind when he heard the title of my sermon, he said, to my not inconsiderable distress, guns. Fully loaded guns. Those of you who know me know that the last image on earth I would reach for to describe a Christian prepared to face the world is a fully loaded gun. I would never encourage followers of the Prince of Peace to think of themselves as fully loaded in that sense. What I actually had in mind with the image in the title was more along the lines of a fully loaded baked potato or a fully loaded vehicle. Something ready to be devoured with delight or something not only eminently road worthy, but also equipped to make the journey more enjoyable and worthwhile in itself. Isn't that what a fully-loaded vehicle is meant to do? No, I didn't have a destroying machine in mind when I chose my title, based on Paul's image of putting on the armor of light. Christians prepared to face the world do not need to be armed for destruction because the world does plenty of that on its own.

“Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.” Paul goes on to list a few of those works of darkness: reveling, drunkenness, debauchery, licentiousness, quarreling, and jealousy. Being the child of two alcoholic parents, I know a thing or two about drunkenness. In our house in those days drunkenness usually accompanied reveling, and when I grew up and went off to college I discovered that the lifestyle of my parents and their friends was very little different from the drunkenness and reveling that disquieted so many of the weekends at the Big Ten Party School where I'd gone to get an education. So my weekends were a bit lonely until Sunday morning, when I reveled in church with its music and singing but without the drunkenness.

Debauchery and licentiousness – Paul uses Greek words having to do with sexual intercourse and a lack of self-control – those, too, made their appearance in the fraternities and sororities and occasionally even in the dormitories at Indiana University in the late 1970s. And I imagine that what I found there then I would still find there today, and on many other campuses as well. Discovering the many opportunities life affords to be sexual and casting off the restraints of the family home appear to be two of the rites of passage associated with the age and circumstances of most college students. There's nothing new under that sun. Maybe Rome was the Athens, Ohio or Ann Arbor, Michigan or Berkeley, California of its day.

And Paul calls those unwanted behaviors satisfying the desires of the flesh, and we know what he's talking about. We've all had them, in one form or another, to varying degrees. And in the narrow Puritanical moralism that so colors American Protestant Christianity, we're content to designate having fun and enjoying sex as satisfying the desires of the flesh. But then Paul throws in a wrench by including jealousy and quarreling in the list of fleshly desires, and if we're thoughtful readers of the Bible, as we should be, we're forced to re-think what a desire of the flesh might be, if it includes jealousy and quarreling. Paul is telling us that even if something has nothing to do with getting drunk and sleeping around, it might still be a desire of the flesh, for which we are to make no provision. Those desires of the flesh might be trickier and more deep-rooted and more pervasive than simply the urge for a drink or the itch of sensuality.

So Paul counsels putting on the armor of light, not to combat the wiles of the devil or the wickedness of the world, but to get our own houses in order. Paul, like Jesus, was an early advocate of changing the world by first changing ourselves, and it is that thought, and not any kind of politics on this or that end of the political spectrum, that forms the core of historic Christian evangelicalism, and that's why I call myself an old evangelical. As the bumper sticker says, Be the change you want to see. Put on the armor of light. Put on the Lord Jesus Christ.

And when you do that, you might discover that the Christian life really comes down to a matter of time management. When you put on the Lord Jesus Christ you might discover that you don't have time for reveling, drunkenness, debauchery, licentiousness, quarreling, and jealousy. It takes time to take down your Bible from the shelf, dust it off, open it up to the four gospels, and actually read what the Lord Jesus Christ taught and did. There are, depending on who's doing the counting, eight, nine, or ten beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount; most of us couldn't come up with more than two or three. But Jesus said that the poor in spirit, the meek, the merciful, the peacemakers – folks like that – he called them blessed, *makarios*, which is the same Greek word for happy. It comes from a Greek root *mak-*, which is where all of our macro- type words come from – macroeconomics, macrobiotic, macromania. The root meaning is to enlarge or to make long or big or great. That's what *makarios*, happiness, blessedness does to a person – it makes them more than they were before. It gives them more of themselves.

And where does that blessedness, that religious happiness, come from? It comes from the armor of light that Paul urged the Christians at Rome to put on. Peacemaking – that's part of the armor of light. Meekness – that's part of the armor of light. Being poor in spirit – that is, impoverishing yourself of your ego-driven impulses – that's part of the armor of light. Hungering and thirsting after righteousness – that, too, is part of the armor of light.

You can't make yourself happy any more than you can make yourself blessed, but you can put yourself in a position to be happy and to be blessed. That's one of the key points our ancestors in the Reformed faith wanted us to understand. We can't control or manipulate God – with our prayers or our candles or our donations or our works of mercy – but we can and must cooperate with God. And we do that, in Paul's words, by putting on the armor of light.

What does light do? Among other things, it helps you see and see truly. I think that's why Jesus is called in the Gospel of John "the light of the world" (8:12). That's one of those "I am" statements that we studied this past summer; Jesus says, "I am the light of the world." Jesus helps us to see and see truly. John identifies Jesus with that light that God created at the beginning and separated from the darkness and considered good. It's not natural sunlight – God didn't create the sun until day four – it's a different, spiritual kind of light, that helps us distinguish God's creative work from the chaos that always surrounds it and threatens to engulf it.

And boy, do we need that spiritual light right now as we all try to sort through the chaos that surrounds us. There's a lot of chaos right now in and around the Caribbean, and there's likely to be more soon in Florida, as folks try to sort through the wreckage of natural disasters. The repeated launching of missiles by North Korea seems a chaotic foreign policy to us. China's building of artificial islands in the Pacific is adding to the chaos of territorial disputes. Sorting through the positions of the nine candidates who want to be the next mayor of Cleveland is going to be chaotic for anyone with the patience to do it.

And that's not even to touch on the topics of immigration and DACA and the wall shutting us off from Mexico and the four thousand more Americans we just sent to a war in Afghanistan that former president Obama said he was going to end. Chaos all around.

"Change and decay in all around I see," we used to sing. "O thou who changest not, abide with me!" The armor of light equips us to meet that change and that decay and that chaos that seem unending and unremitting. It helps us see clearly what our mission is and what it is not. That armor protects us from the half-truths, the half-baked notions, the hidden motives, the fake news, the spin.

If you've ever gone down to that great treasure in earthen vessels known as the Cleveland Museum of Art, you may have gone into the Armor Court with its gleaming suits of armor that remind me of the Tin Man in *The Wizard of Oz*. They're ingenious things, those suits of armor, with their helmets and visors and gorgets and cuirasses and greaves, and you may have tried to count the pieces and gotten lost in all the plates and nuts and bolts.

I reckon that's what most of us first think of when we hear the words "armor of light," but when you reflect some more about that image, and I hope you will reflect on it, perhaps something less violent may come to your mind and maybe even prompt you to action. As I thought about what Paul might have meant by urging me and the Christians at Rome to put on the armor of light, I found my mind going back to Mary Biven, my third-grade teacher, who taught me how to read. I know that, by today's standards, I would be considered a very backward child only learning to read by age eight, and I probably was reading, some, before then. But for reasons unfathomable to me now, it was sitting beside Mrs. Biven's board that she pulled out from her desk, that had a piece of paper taped to it with all of our names on it and the numbers of the lessons in our reading books that she would circle when we finished them satisfactorily – that's remains in my memory as learning to read. Or maybe there was

something in the way Mary Biven interacted with us children that lodged itself in my memory as a positive thing, and set me on my path as a lifelong reader.

I don't know. What I do know is this: that without being able to read, I would not be the person I am today, I would not have had the life I've had, and I could not be your pastor. I would not know how to study Paul's words about the armor of light or Jesus's words about the peacemakers being blessed or our president's words about immigration or the war in Afghanistan. I can study their words because I can read what they have said and what others have said in response. Being able to read is such a fundamental tool in helping us get at the realities of life, it's hard for me not to consider reading part of the armor of light that Paul considered so terribly important. And perhaps that's one of the reasons we Christians, and our Muslim cousins and our Jewish ancestors have historically been referred to as "people of the book." We return, again and again, to a book, that still point in the turning world, that we call Scripture, to get our bearings, to test the spirits, and to revive our spirits by hearing again the wonderful words of life.

So I give thanks almost every day for Mary Biven and for all the teachers who taught us to reading and writing and arithmetic and helped us put on the armor of light. I thank God for my father, who was a preacher before he took to drink, and gave me an honest road to my calling and another piece of the armor of light. I thank God for my mother, who carried me to church before I could walk there myself, and helped me put on more of the armor of light. I thank God for my Granny, whose table was always rich enough to accommodate one more, and showed me what true hospitality looks like. Hospitality is most assuredly part of the armor of light. I thank God for Cordelia and Vick and Van, the only African-American family in our little town, who showed me what a well-kept garden and an immaculate house look like, and what fresh green beans with carrots and okra taste like, and what grace in the face of discrimination feels and sounds like. Their modeling of Christian grace while never crossing the threshold of a church door was an important piece of my armor of light.

Who helped you put on your armor of light and thus prepared you to live as a faithful Christian in the world? Say for them, if you will, a little prayer.