

Ephesians 6:14b

Introduction

What's the mystery of God's will? How dare we ask that question? How could we ever know? May we never forget that one of the blessings with which God has blessed us in the heavenly places is the *making known to us* the mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure (1:9). So...

What's the mystery of God's will? It's to unite all things in Christ. That's the big picture in Ephesians. That's the theme that ties everything in Ephesians together. What does it require for God to accomplish the mystery of His will? It requires the exceeding greatness of God's power which He exercised fully in Christ. What did God do in the exercise of His great power? He went forth to battle against the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places so that He might reconcile us to Himself in Christ. Now we're seated with Christ in the heavenly places. What else did God do? He went forth to battle against the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places so that He might reconcile us to each other in Christ. Now by our very existence as the body of Christ, we're a constant reminder to the rulers and authorities of their defeat. God has truly blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ. And now, in the full knowledge of this mystery unveiled before us, Paul concludes:

- ✓ Ephesians 6:10-13 — From now on, be empowered in the Lord, and in the strength of his might. Put on the complete armor of God that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil, because our intense struggle is not against blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the world powers of this darkness, against the evil spiritual beings in the heavenly places. Because of this, take up the complete armor of God in order that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand.

Satan has already been defeated and the ground has already been won. But Satan hasn't yet been utterly vanquished. He still "prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to **devour**" (1 Pet. 5:8). He hates us because we're the ones in whom God is working out His plan for the uniting of all things in Christ. And so Satan's constant goal is our **alienation from God** through sin and unbelief, and our **alienation from one another** through pride, and selfishness, and bitterness, and anger. That's why Paul warns us about false teaching ("human **cunning**" and "**craftiness** in the service of the **scheme** of **error**"). That's why Paul warns us not to give "place to the **Devil**" by our anger. That's why Paul warns us against all the "unfruitful works of **darkness**." That's why Paul warns us that the days are still "**evil**." Satan has already been defeated and the ground has already been won. But now that it's been won, our calling is to **stand**. And the **only** way we can stand is by "putting on" and "taking up" the complete armor of God.

In the midst of our intense struggle, God has made every provision for us to be able to stand (cf. 2 Pet. 1:3). The armor that he provides is complete, lacking in nothing. It is the "panoplia" (the panoply) of God. And this armor that God provides is nothing other than the "new man" that we are to be daily putting on – the new man that God Himself has created in righteousness and holiness of the truth (Eph. 4:22, 24). The new man that we are to put on isn't just the "evidence"

that we're truly Christians, it's actually God's gracious provision for *battle* – so that we might stand and not fall. The “new person” that we are to put on isn't just evidence of past salvation, it's actually the key to our survival and final salvation on the future day of the Lord. So now Paul exhorts us all:

“Stand, therefore, having girded your waist with truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness”

What's the truth? It's that unshakable, solid foundation upon which all of our thinking, and speaking, and living is based. The truth is the whole will of God throughout all of Scripture that's fully and finally summed up and revealed to us in Jesus (Eph. 1:13; 4:20-21; 4:15, 25; 4:24; 5:9). It's of the utmost importance that we be steeped, and grounded in truth.

So then, what's righteousness? It's the way we live when we're living in *obedience* to the truth. Peter speaks of having purified our souls by our obedience to the truth (1 Pet. 1:22) The truth isn't just something we know in our heads – it's something we live. If truth is the soil in which the roots of the tree grow down deep, then maybe we could say that righteousness is the good crop of fruit that the tree bears as a result. We saw last time that In Isaiah chapter 11 righteousness and truth are connected: “He shall have his loins girt with *righteousness*, and his sides clothed with *truth*” (Isaiah 11:5; LXX). And here in Ephesians, in both places where Paul uses the word “righteousness,” it's always connected with “truth.”

- ✓ Ephesians 5:9 — The fruit of the light is in all goodness and *righteousness* and *truth*...
- ✓ Ephesians 4:24 — Put on the new man, the one created according to God in *righteousness* and holiness of the *truth*.

Jesus prayed:

- ✓ John 17:17 — *Sanctify* them in the *truth*.

So as one of our defenses in the battle, we are to be actively living blameless and upright lives in obedience to the truth. If we're not hungering and thirsting for righteousness in our lives (cf. Mat. 5:6), then we're opening ourselves up wide to compromise and failure and despair.

- ✓ 1 Timothy 6:11 — But as for you, O man of God, flee these things. *Pursue righteousness*...
- ✓ 2 Timothy 2:22 — So flee youthful passions and *pursue righteousness*...

“*Put on* the breastplate of *righteousness*.” If we're going to stand in the evil day we must actively work at living every day in obedience to the truth, in light of the truth, in accordance with the truth that we have come to know in Jesus. Righteousness has to do with how we *act* in our *daily dealings* with God and our *daily dealings* with each other (Hoehner; cf. Lincoln, O'Brien, Thielman). So righteousness is a “*doing*.” Righteousness is a “happening” thing. Righteousness is the day to day working out of our salvation (Phil. 2:12) in obedience to the word of truth, the Gospel (cf. Rom. 6:13; Phil. 1:10-11). Over the last three chapters of Ephesians, Paul has been describing in detail this breastplate of righteousness that God has given

us to put on. And over and over he pictures our obedience to the truth as a daily “walk” – as a “doing.”

- ✓ “I urge you therefore... to *walk* worthy of the calling with which you were called... This therefore I say and testify in the Lord that you no longer *walk* just as the Gentiles also *walk* in the futility of their mind... Therefore be imitators of God as beloved children, and *walk* in love... For you were once darkness, but now — light in the Lord. *Walk* as children of light... Watch carefully therefore how you *walk*, not as unwise but as wise...” (4:1, 17; 5:2, 8, 15)

But now here’s something very important, and very wonderful. The world is glad to affirm the word “good” and to say that there are “good” people. But if you think about it, you know that the world doesn’t want anything to do with righteousness, or with righteous people. Why? What’s the difference? The good person and the righteous person may *look* very much the same. But the good person is living ultimately by a standard that’s rooted in the authority of human beings, while the righteous person consciously and gladly *confesses* that the standard he lives by is given by *God*. If you think about it, this shows in all sorts of ways that there’s a world of difference between the “good” and the “righteous.” Which are you? Are you a righteous boy or girl? Are you a righteous man or woman? Are you pursuing a good life, or a righteous life? When the new governor of Illinois (for whom we should pray as an authority over us ordained by God) says that he has no social agenda, this is a rejection of righteousness. When he says that the vulnerable in society are the poor and not the unborn, this is a rejection of righteousness. Here is a desire to be accounted “good,” but not righteous. I can be “good” so long as I meet my own expectations or the expectations of society in general. But to be righteous implies the expectations of a God who says: “You shall be holy, for *I* am holy” (1 Pet. 1:16). It implies the conscious, thoughtful rooting of all that we think, say, and do, in the soil of God’s truth – as a surrender to His command.

- ✓ Matthew 5:48 — You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Put on, then, the breastplate of righteousness. The Christian life is very much about *doing*. And so one of Satan’s schemes is to replace the “doing” of righteousness with the “doing” of being good. A breastplate of “being good” is something of our own creation, and no matter how hard we work, it will always be flawed and defective. It will always leave us fully exposed to Satan’s attacks – to the burden of legalism and guilt and despair, or to the opiate of complacency and lethargy (straddling the fence), to the deadly poison of pride and self-congratulation. But the breastplate of righteousness protects us from all of these things.

You see, when we pursue *righteousness*, we’re first of all reminded of the One who *is* our perfect righteousness by His own perfect obedience to God’s truth. When we put on the breastplate of righteousness, we put it on in the full knowledge that we’ve already been justified and declared righteous by Christ’s righteousness imputed to our account. So our righteousness (and there is a sense in which we can truly call it ours) is made possible because of His righteousness, in which we have been *fully clothed*. But when we’re just trying to “be good,” we can only feel that we’re still naked before God, and still trying desperately to cover up that nakedness. To think of our righteousness is to be reminded of His righteousness. But that’s not the case when we think of trying to “be good.”

When we pursue *righteousness*, we're second of all encouraged with a walk—a manner of life and conduct—that's clearly laid out before us. When we're just trying to be good, we're left to our own feelings and ideas. To “be good” is a fuzzy, nebulous kind of thing, and so it ends up being quite hopeless and impossible. But to be righteous is something tangible and real because it's rooted in truth. To put on the breastplate of righteousness is to walk on a path that is brightly lit and laid out before our feet – a path that we know leads to abundant, everlasting life. I think of these words of God in Isaiah:

- ✓ Isaiah 30:21 — And your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, “This is the way, walk in it,” when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left.

Do you hear this word behind you? Do you see your path laid clearly before your feet? This is the blessing of righteousness.

When we pursue true *righteousness*, we are promised thirdly the enabling, empowering grace of God. To be righteous is infinitely more rigorous than just being good. But on the other hand, it is really only *possible* to be righteous, and quite *impossible* to be good! No one has ever truly *succeeded* at being good, but there are multitudes of Christians who have lived truly righteous lives. God doesn't promise grace for being good. He promises grace for living righteously. Now I've made a distinction between the words “good” and “righteous” because of how people might think of these words today. But in Ephesians, Paul describes all righteous obedience to the truth as the doing of “good works” – and notice how it's all in the context of God's grace.

- ✓ Ephesians 2:10 — For *we are his workmanship created in Christ Jesus* for good works [for righteousness], which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them [that we should walk righteously].

God is the one who prepared the good works (the righteous “doing”) beforehand, and God is the one who then enables us by virtue of our creation in Christ to walk in those good works (to do the righteousness) that He has already prepared. And so it's still all of God's grace. The breastplate of righteousness is armor that *God* has made available, and that we are now to “take up” and “put on” so that in our intense struggle against the powers of darkness, we might stand firm.

Conclusion

There's a world of difference between self-produced goodness, and grace enabled righteousness. So it can be very helpful, both in a convicting way, and in an encouraging way to ask ourselves this question: Am I a good person, or am I a righteous person? Am I living a good life, or am I living a righteous life? Am I acting toward God and others as generally good and moral people expect, or am I acting in righteousness? Am I living a life of conscious obedience and conformity to God's truth, the truth that is summed up and fulfilled in Jesus?

Christianity is about “*doing*.” The question is, “What kind?” Christianity is not about being good (that leads to arrogance, complacency, guilt, and despair), but it is all about being righteous – and that leads to *humility* and a wonderful, joyful *confidence*.

“Apart from... a [righteous] life the would-be Christian has *no defense* against Satan’s accusations. He has no assurance of salvation. And he also lacks the power to attack, for the testimony of the lips will be ineffective... and the evil one will not be vanquished. On the other hand, when *righteousness* in conduct is present, what a mighty weapon for defense and offense it becomes!” (Hendriksen)

So are you daily *putting on* the breastplate of *righteousness*? Can we pray with the Psalmist:

- ✓ Psalm 7:8 [NASB] — Vindicate me, O LORD, according to my righteousness and my integrity that is in me.
- ✓ Psalm 17:15 — As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness; when I awake, I shall be satisfied with your likeness.
- ✓ Psalm 18:20 — The LORD dealt with me according to my righteousness; according to the cleanness of my hands he rewarded me.

If we can pray like that, we’ll also know what it means to pray like this:

- ✓ Psalm 5:8 — Lead me, O LORD, in your righteousness... make your way straight before me.
- ✓ Psalm 23:3 — He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.

Paul said: “Let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.” But here’s the good news of God’s grace. When we put on the breastplate of righteousness, when we put on this piece of armor that God provides, we can’t possibly fail to stand. ***Our righteousness*** is our obedience to God’s truth – our living faithfully in response to God’s character and promises. ***God’s righteousness*** is His faithfulness to Himself – His faithfulness to act in perfect accordance with His own character and promises. So even while our righteousness is very different from God’s, Paul still wants us to see that in some sense it’s the very same armor that God Himself put on when He went forth to battle in His Messiah.

- ✓ Isaiah 11:4–5 — With righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. [And he shall have his ***loins girt with righteousness***, and his ***sides clothed with truth***; LXX].
- ✓ Isaiah 59:15–17 — The LORD saw... that there was no man, and wondered that there was no one to intercede; then his own arm brought him salvation, and ***his righteousness upheld him***. ***He put on righteousness as a breastplate***...

“Stand, therefore,” brothers and sisters, “having girded your waist with truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness...”