

Sincerity First and Foremost in the Christian Armour

Ephesians 6.14

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Of all the Christian virtues, love is named in the New Testament as the greatest and first, but when several virtues are presented as the Christian's armour, *sincerity* is the piece which must be donned first as foundational to all others. If not the 'greatest' it is a pivotal virtue. Do we possess it? And do we know how to maintain it?

Paul speaks of putting on the whole armour of God in order to resist the wiles or strategies of the devil. The 'whole armour' refers to the full range of armour and weapons, not just the protective suit of metal. Both offensive and defensive weapons are included.

The need for armour is that wicked spirits of terrifying power and cunning employ their strategies against us, including temptation to sin and the undermining of assurance. In addition the demons of darkness constantly strive to distract us from our mission for souls, seeking to bring down all witness if they can.

They may do this by dangling in front of us worldly attractions, and shaking our priorities, so that God's work is no longer our chief aim. They want to bring individuals and churches to spiritual coldness and lethargy.

They also assail with 'doctrines of demons', introducing into sound churches false ideas and false methods. How much we need the armour of God!

Military Determination

Paul tells us to take the whole armour of God – 'that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day'. What is the evil day? To some extent every day is an evil day because the devil never sleeps. But there are some days and some seasons when Satan and his host are particularly ferocious. Sometimes they call off their assault in order to bring us to a false sense of security, but then, suddenly, they try multiple temptations together. But the armour of God is sufficient, if only we employ it. Paul's words – 'Stand therefore' – are full of determination, and as individual believers and as churches we must respond – 'We will give no ground.'

We must stand firm in all attempts to draw us either into sin or away from the great mission of Christ. We must resist all the assaults of heresies, false methods and irreverent worship, with great determination. But how do we get such determination? The answer lies in the first piece of armour. 'Stand therefore,' says the apostle, 'having your loins girt about with *truth*.'

The Armour and its Belt

To see the full significance of this belt of truth we must quickly describe the armour of a Roman soldier. He had a sword, and possibly a short sword also, more like a very large knife. He was usually sent out with two javelins, and to defend himself he had a shield. His clothing consisted of a broad belt, thought to be six to eight inches wide, even larger than a weight-lifter's belt, made of leather, a quarter of an inch thick or more. This was covered by vertical strips of iron, so that the belt was flexible, yet provided protective metal over the midriff. From this belt a kind of leather skirt extended, also covered with strips of metal to protect the thighs. On his legs the soldier wore greaves, an old

word for what we would call shin-pads, only larger, made of metal, and strapped on firmly. Then he had a helmet and a breastplate.

Foundational to all was the belt, not only because it provided protection but because the breastplate and backplate were donned rather like a sandwich board, then anchored to the belt front and back.

The sword and knife were also holstered to the belt, together with the javelins – attached by clasps. It is thought that even the shield was attached to the backplate and belt, with other articles also. The belt, therefore, was the firm foundation for other components. In addition it ‘braced’ the soldier ready for action. With all this in mind, the apostle lists the items vital for Christian warfare, beginning with the words – ‘having your loins girt about with truth’.

Naturally we want to know what is meant here by truth. Does the apostle mean – ‘before you put on any other item of spiritual armour, put on the Truth, or the fundamental doctrines of the faith; make sure you believe and hold on to the Truth of God because you cannot proceed to the warfare without this’? This interpretation would certainly make sense, but it cannot be correct because doctrinal truth is mentioned later as – ‘the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God’.

Perhaps, then, ‘truth’ in this passage means that we must put on first and foremost honesty. This, too, is unlikely as honesty (a basic moral value) is most probably included in ‘the breastplate of righteousness’, mentioned later.

So what is meant by having one’s loins girt about with truth? The best interpretation is that it means truth or truthfulness in the sense of sincerity and genuineness. Says Paul, put around your loins the girdle, the belt, of sincerity, which will firmly hold all the other Christian virtues vital to your spiritual warfare.

Sincerity for Defence and Attack

Sincerity is a wonderful virtue, given as a gift by the Spirit at conversion. This is implied in the illustration of the armour of the Roman soldier, because this was not manufactured or purchased by the soldier but provided for him. He simply collected his equipment from the armoury, and so it is with sincerity. It is a gift.

We cannot create sincerity within us; it must be given to us by the power of God. The heart is deceitful above all things, and the belt of genuineness, guilelessness and sincerity must come from God alone. There has never been a true convert who was not made deeply sincere. Sadly, much of this ‘birth’ sincerity can slip away, but God will restore, renew and strengthen it on application.

We have all known people who were proud, unteachable, devious, subtle and self-seeking before conversion, but one of the great signs of God’s regenerating work was the arrival of real sincerity, and this must continue to be the foundation for everything else.

The belt of sincerity is powerful *defensive* armour, because it makes it much more difficult for the devil to bring us down. A sincere believer is conscientious about conduct, recoiling from duplicity, hypocrisy, and anything else which would undermine the work of the Lord.

However, the belt of sincerity may also be viewed as an *offensive* weapon, for it held the soldier’s swords and spears. It is productive for the Gospel because unsaved people will usually respect and listen to people who are very evidently sincere. All but the most hardened people respect sincerity.

Like the soldier’s belt, sincerity also braces and nerves believers for battle, moving us to do the best we can for the Lord, and to prepare ourselves personally and prayerfully for spiritual endeavour. It is insincerity which is confident and casual about matters.

The Benefits of Sincerity

There are several words for sincerity in the Greek New Testament, one meaning – tested by the sun and found to be pure and genuine. Another means ‘legitimate’ or legitimately born, pointing away from pretence and hypocrisy. Still another word translated ‘sincere’ means without decay, free from rot. In other words, a sincere person is utterly genuine and consistent.

The devil hates sincerity, because he was a liar from the beginning. Sincerity repels him and makes him squirm, so that he is loath to come near. By contrast, insincerity encourages satanic attack. ‘A doubleminded man,’ says James, ‘is unstable in all his ways.’

Insincerity accommodates an alternative agenda in the mind, so that we partly intend to pursue Christian aims, but other ideas, delights and ambitions also clamour for attention in our mind. The sincere person has only one objective, which is to please and serve the Lord, and this constitutes a built-in protection against Satan and backsliding.

Sincerity, as the foundational belt for other virtues, makes our zeal pure. Zeal without sincerity is often inspired by a desire to be seen doing things for the Lord. Sincerity, however, purifies our motives, so that we want to see souls saved and Christ alone glorified.

Sincerity makes us averse to sin and inclined to obey the Lord. Sincerity is always conscientious, the sincere person keeping his promises whether made to the Lord, to the church, or in the world, and keeping up his duties and responsibilities.

A sincere person finds boasting distasteful to him. He cannot put on a front, or dishonestly exaggerate his accomplishments.

A sincere person is far less likely to be ill-natured or ill-tempered, because in such moods we usually see things in an exaggerated or false way, and sincerity cannot do this.

Sincerity, therefore, is a great protection; a foundation item in the armour of sanctification. Without the girdle of sincerity the breastplate of righteousness cannot be properly attached.

Paul concludes the ‘Christian armour’ passage with a powerful call to prayer, but there is little prayer when there is little sincerity, and without prayer the rest of the armour is useless.

The Loss of Sincerity

1 How does insincerity return to the life of the believer? It creeps in under a number of circumstances, the first being double-mindedness, referred to earlier. We may want blessing for the church and for souls, and we may want to know more of Christ, but if we put alongside these desires things for ourselves, so that we have dual aims, we take the high road to a serious loss of sincerity.

If we extend the apostle’s military illustration, we are on the Lord’s side, but we also have interests on the other side. What kind of a soldier is such a person going to make? What kind of Christians can we be? What level of zeal can we have if we have sympathies for the other side – the world’s side?

2 Sincerity is also undermined if we dislike some of the duties of the Christian life and skip them. Basic duties of the Christian ‘military’ life are maintained by sincerity, including faith, prayer, self-examination, mortification of sin, witness and service. If we dislike and refrain from any of these duties, we instantly forfeit sincerity – the foundation item of spiritual armour.

3 Deviousness also jettisons sincerity. If, for example, we hide things in our lives that we would not

want other Christians to know about, becoming secretive and unstraightforward, how can sincerity survive? The downright lie certainly shatters it.

4 Another sure way of undermining sincerity is to allow our sense of danger on account of the strength and the power of the enemy to be diminished. Sincerity depends on reality. It has a serious quality and cannot co-exist with shallow overconfidence. It deeply desires to stand in the battle, and because it has an abiding awareness of the weakness of the heart and the great cunning of Satan, it watches with care.

5 Sincerity will certainly fade away if as Christians we no longer want to win the battle for souls and for holiness. If, for example, we don't particularly want to witness, and opt out of Christ's mission, we are bound to suppress our sincerity, because we once gave ourselves wholly and unreservedly to the Lord, and have gone back on our vows. We have probably repeated our first pledge to Christ many times, reconsecrating ourselves and yielding ourselves afresh, but we no longer intend to keep all these promises. Where is sincerity then?

6 Sincerity also evaporates once we lose our realisation that the Lord's eye is upon his people all the time – that precious conviction 'Thou God seest me' (*Genesis 16.13*). The awareness that we are in the Lord's view constantly is the bulwark and bedrock of sincerity. With this we cannot take licence to do anything we like, and we react properly to all the trials of life. Christ is near, and knows all, and this consciousness is the fire and life of true sincerity.

So sincerity is broken by divided allegiance, by double-living, by the omission of Christian duties, by loss of our sense of danger, by our no longer wanting to fight and win the good fight of faith, and by insensitivity to the watchful presence of the Lord. Sincerity – that vital gift from the Lord – is ripped from us by all these things, giving way to hardness of heart and ultimately to the cancer of hypocrisy.

When we consider these pitfalls, we are only too glad sincerity may be reactivated by repentance before God, re-dedication, and the earnest renewing of our vows.

Putting on the Belt of Sincerity

1 It is one thing to know what puts sincerity at risk, but how do we positively put it on as a Roman soldier would buckle on his belt? Firstly and obviously, we pray for it. We pray for all kinds of things but do we pray with great desire for sincerity?

We can strengthen our desire for it (and desire is vital to meaningful prayer) if we see the ugliness and the weakness of insincerity. To be horrified by insincerity urges us to watch our hearts and to pray for the opposite. Insincerity is an ugly, septic scar of hypocrisy ruining the Christian life. Constantly we need to ask ourselves, 'Am I real? Am I genuine? Am I truly sincere in my faith and in my walk?' Such thoughts and challenges will drive us to pray for sincerity.

2 Here is another great spur to putting on sincerity: think of the cost of the soul purchased by Christ on Calvary's cross. Think of what he has spent on us, and what he has done for us. He did not suffer immeasurable agonies in body and soul to purchase phoney, half-committed, spiritually anaemic, reluctant, compromised, vacillating Christians. Do we not want to be made in his image?

3 To put on the belt of sincerity we must be determined to respond to the movement of conscience whenever it troubles us by the spurring of the Holy Spirit. When drawn by some sinful desire, or inclined to a wrong mood or reaction, or some white lie or spiteful word comes to our lips, will we be ready and willing to heed the warning voice of conscience? Will we respond, and immediately put an end to the rising sin? Responsiveness to conscience, and eagerness to promptly obey, is a

large part of 'putting on sincerity'. But to suppress conscience, even if only for the moment, is to throw off the belt of sincerity.

4 To put on the belt of sincerity we determine to be very specific in our praying. By contrast, to generalise with God in prayer is to foster insincerity. For example, when it comes to prayer time, we should not repent superficially, merely praying, 'Lord forgive me, I repent.' This is not sincere repentance, but foolish, shallow self-delusion. We must remember what we have done, or at least the broad pattern of sins on our conscience, for which we need forgiveness. We must name them, and feel the burden and shame of them, and pledge a better course of action to avoid them.

Shallow or generalised repentance is counterfeit repentance, inconsistent with sincerity. Similarly, in prayers of intercession, people must be in mind, and they must be interceded for with compassion and desire. General sentiments are empty, easy, lazy, and insincere. Preachers often quote some well-known lines to illustrate this kind of superficiality:

I knelt in prayer when day was done, And prayed, 'O God, bless everyone.' Of course, in public prayer the one leading cannot be so specific, and that is understood. He must pray earnestly but his prayers are bound to be general in character. However, in private prayer, 'God bless the persecuted!' is not enough.

By being more specific in all our praying we will fasten firmly around us the girdle of sincerity.

5 The belt of sincerity involves the adoption of great care in recognising the Lord's dealings with us as his people. Sincerity is not served by ascribing things to God lightly, but when the Lord has intervened and helped in a remarkable way, then we praise him and testify to his goodness. If a bus just happens to come at the right moment, we should not rush and tell our friends, 'The Lord sent a bus.' In our heart we may think that, and we may thank God, but we should speak only about weighty and significant instances.

Some Christians are very foolish saying, 'The Lord did this! The Lord did that!' It undermines sincerity because they parade things they cannot be sure of. Their talk becomes light and over-pious, tripping off the tongue without real thought, awe, or gratitude. It is an affectation, artificial and contrived, and may even become a matter of spiritual pride and self-advertisement. Real appreciation of God's unmistakable acts humbles and assures us, fuelling sincerity.

6 To put on sincerity we must seek to be consistent people, keeping spiritual priorities uppermost even when we are very busy and responsibilities press upon us. We must put on the belt of sincerity in our family life, in our personal life, in our business life, never allowing spiritual goals and prayer to be washed away.

The Beauty of Sincerity

Sincerity is outstandingly beautiful, enhancing and adorning the personality and character of every kind of person. From the very simplest believer to the greatest intellectual, sincerity makes everyone far more attractive. It is a wonderful virtue which shines out of every possessor. The oldest believer is enriched and elevated by it, and so is the youngest. As we have noted, it is respected by all unsaved onlookers, and so it commends the believer and his message more than almost anything else, particularly to the young.

One of the remarkable features of children is that they spot sincerity or insincerity a mile away. It is curious that such perception seldom survives beyond childhood. If we are sincere people, our Sunday School children will listen to us, and our own children will respect us because children discern sincerity.

However, the greatest of all the benefits flowing from sincerity is that Christ will come in to us by his Spirit, to give greater light and blessing. Insincerity, like pride, drives him away.

The Family of Sincerity

The father of sincerity is gratitude, and if we keep alive and active a feelingful gratitude to God for all that he has done for us, we will be sincere people.

The mother of sincerity is love, so that if we love the Lord with all our heart, this will help us to be sincere.

The brother of sincerity is faith, for the one always strengthens the other. And the sister of sincerity is diligence, and if we are diligent and conscientious, especially in spiritual matters, we will maintain sincerity.

So let us say: 'Lord, make me and keep me sincere and genuine in my spiritual life, my family life, and my behaviour in the world.'

Put on the girdle of truth, or sincerity! What protection it provides! What strength lies in this! And what an example is provided for others!

Sincerity is the basis of our determination to please God and to defeat the devil. It makes us stick at what we have undertaken, enables us to stand, and it serves as a wonderful jewel in the personality and character of the possessor. Sincerity will protect the church from the powers and rulers of the darkness of this world, and make us all diligent and effective in the defence of the Truth. Sincerity will mightily help us fulfil the great commission of the Lord. Precious, humble, radiant sincerity or genuineness is undoubtedly what is laid before us here in *Ephesians 6.14*: 'Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth.'