

WEEK 7
04.17.16

PROTECTED AND PASSIONATE



FOCUS VERSE

Ephesians 6:14

And having on the breastplate of righteousness.

LESSON TEXT

Mark 12:28–34

28 And one of the scribes came, and having heard them reasoning together, and perceiving that he had answered them well, asked him, Which is the first commandment of all?

29 And Jesus answered him, The first of all the commandments is, Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord:

30 And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment.

31 And the second is like, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these.

32 And the scribe said unto him, Well, Master, thou hast said the truth: for there is one God; and there is none other but he:

33 And to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the soul, and with all the strength, and to love his neighbour as himself, is more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.

34 And when Jesus saw that he answered discreetly, he said unto him, Thou art not far from the kingdom of God. And no man after that durst ask him any question.



FOCUS THOUGHT

God provides righteousness to serve as a breastplate to protect the heart and lungs from the devil's attacks and to allow the believer to maintain passion for right things.



CULTURE CONNECTION

She Gave Her Living

Every year the UCLA Higher Education Research Institute conducts a national survey of first-time full-time college freshmen. In 1974 about two-thirds of those surveyed said that developing a meaningful philosophy of life was very important or essential to them. Less than half of 1974 freshmen rated being very well off financially as a top priority. Forty years later opinion had reversed. In 2014 more than 80 percent of freshmen said wealth was a top priority while less than half selected developing a meaningful philosophy of life. Today, even many Christians prioritize knowing how to make a living over knowing how to live.

In the account of the widow's mites Jesus told his disciples the widow had given more

than all the wealthy people had donated because she gave all of her living while they gave out of abundance. As far as we can tell from the passage, she never knew her sacrifice was appreciated or even noticed. The widow would go hungry that day, yet Jesus did not tell his disciples to share their meal with her. He did not pick up a rock and turn it into bread or multiply her flour. If we need to be noticed, rewarded, or praised for our sacrifices, they become payments or bribes rather than works of righteousness. We too can learn to be living sacrifices, asking nothing in return. It makes little practical difference that Christ has conquered death if we do not learn to conquer living.

OUTLINE

- I. LOVING GOD AS TOP PRIORITY
- II. THE HEART NEEDS PROTECTION
- III. THE LUNGS NEED PROTECTION
- IV. DAVID'S RIGHTEOUSNESS (BREASTPLATE)
- V. RIGHTEOUSNESS PROTECTS AND INSPIRES PASSION
 - A. Passion in Prayer
 - B. Passion for Mission

CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

Most everyone is passionate about something. Olympic athletes devote their lives to prepare for winning an event. When other children are outside playing, they are attending lessons, practicing, and dedicating themselves without reservation. Those thousands of hours point toward one moment of time when they hope to cross a finish line or compete ably in some event. Receiving a gold medal is their passion.

Some collectors spare no effort to possess the finest in everything from fine art to classic

cars to antique Pez dispensers. They scour websites, attend conventions, and peruse newsletters seeking a lead on a rare find. For the right to own what no one else has, they will travel around the world and spend exorbitant sums of money. Finding a collector's item is their passion.

For the trained musician, the perfect performance is his passion. For the business mogul, the next successful acquisition with its attendant riches is her passion. For the photographer, it is the perfect shot. For the birdwatcher it is the previously unseen feathered friend. For the hunter, it is the trophy mount. For the shopper, it is the extraordinary bargain. Nearly everyone has a passion.

Those of us called out for His namesake are no different, except our passion is to be fixed on a different goal. We seek to love Him, to be like Him, and to serve Him! Avid and habitual pursuit of anything less is an unworthy expenditure of our physical, emotional, and spiritual energy. This is why the wise man Solomon charged us to "keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life" (Proverbs 4:23). Our hearts, as the source of passions, must be protected throughout life. To that end, our armor includes the breastplate

of righteousness. Every desire, affection, and passion of our hearts must be shielded by the righteousness of God.

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

I. LOVING GOD AS TOP PRIORITY

Jesus had grown quite accustomed to the questions of religious leaders. In their efforts to trip Him up and to find something in His words for which they could condemn Him to death, the scribes, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and other religious leaders commonly posed questions to the Lord.

Jesus was in Jerusalem when a scribe came to Him with yet another question. "What is the first commandment of all?" The inquirer was not asking for the first chronologically, but rather for the first in importance. What one commandment supersedes all others? Or perhaps more accurately, which one encapsulates all the others? Jesus turned to the most significant passage from the Old Testament for the Jewish nation to answer this question.

It is commonly known as the *Shema* (shə-'ma) and is found in Deuteronomy 6:4: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD." These words were quoted at least twice daily by a devout Jew. They were often carried in a small scroll on the body of the religious leaders. They were taught to the children of that nation at the youngest possible age, and each child was instructed to quote those words nightly before going to sleep. A Jewish man sought to have them be the last words he spoke in this life.

It should have come as no surprise to the listeners that Jesus would respond from this passage. "And Jesus answered him, The first of all the commandments is, Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord" (Mark 12:29). What may have startled them, however, is that He continued to the following verse in Deuteronomy: "And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment" (Mark 12:30).

The highest act of obedience we can render to the Lord is to love Him completely and unreservedly. While temporal relationships command our emotions and allegiance, none of them should supplant our relationship with

God. We may have affection for many things in this life, but toward none of them should we exhibit a greater fidelity than to Him. He alone demands and occupies the pinnacle of our devotion. Nothing and no one can be allowed to rival Him in terms of our allegiance and affection.

So profound should be our love toward Him that all other affections pale in comparison. This is what Jesus was saying in Luke 14:26: "If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple." This One who demonstrated honor toward His own mother and commanded the same from us toward our parents was not suggesting true hatred toward loved ones. Indeed He commanded us to love one another and stated that love would be the identifying mark of His followers. (See John 13:35.) He is, however, instructing by these somewhat shocking words that our love for Him must be so supreme that no other affection comes close to it in depth or passion. With heart, soul, mind and strength, we are to love Him completely. He does not tolerate divided loyalties. Loving God wholeheartedly is the supreme expression of our obedience to Him!

II. THE HEART NEEDS PROTECTION

In Mark 12:30 the first source of our love Jesus listed is the heart. This is not to suggest the physical organ in our chest is the seat of affections. We know physiologically it is not. But the heart is a wonder. Without our even thinking about it, this muscle about the size of a large fist and weighing only slightly more than half a pound in most cases, will contract approximately 2.5 billion times in the average life. Over that length of time it will pump nearly two hundred million gallons of blood through the body's almost sixty thousand miles of vessels. And yet there is nothing mystical about the cardiac organ contracting inside our chest cavity to make it the fountain from which our love flows.

But in biblical writings, the heart is generally depicted as the source of our thinking (Proverbs 3:27), our emotions (Proverbs 15:13), and our will (Acts 11:23). And when it comes to our affections, this is still a common

depiction even in our current Western culture. Hearts are the symbol of love on Valentine's Day. Songwriters have penned hundreds of works referring to the love that flows from our hearts. Unrequited love is said to "break" our hearts. To love someone is to "give" him or her our heart. So we understand the words of Scripture commanding us to love Him with our whole heart!

But the heart, for all its durability, is vulnerable. In battle, it would be a target for the enemy's sword or spear. The skilled combatant did not aim for the foot or for the elbow. He sought to inflict damage to the heart. Therefore a man going into battle would have armor to protect his heart. And so do we.

As Paul was detailing the armor of God the Christian should wear, he included this important protective piece over the heart: "the breastplate of righteousness" (Ephesians 6:14). God's righteousness protects our love for Him: both His righteousness imputed to us through obedient faith at salvation and His righteousness demonstrated through ongoing obedience in our lives. That covering protects our hearts (our love for God) from the attack of the enemy of our souls.

For all the wonder of the heart that loves God, we must also recognize it is vulnerable. Jeremiah went so far as to say one's heart, if left to itself, would be terribly wicked and unpredictable. "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?" (Jeremiah 17:9). One might say that spiritually, we all have heart disease. Our hearts cannot be trusted to inherently crave right things. To the contrary, our hearts, if left unprotected by righteousness, will consistently draw us toward wickedness.

The righteousness that covers our hearts is twofold. It comes first from that which is credited to our account when we exercise saving faith through our obedience to the gospel. We could never be righteous through our own efforts. The Scriptures make clear that all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags. (See Isaiah 64:6.) Only when we enact our faith by obedience to the message of new birth do we become the recipients of the pure righteousness of Jesus Christ. His purity is attributed to us by grace through faith. "Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but

according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost" (Titus 3:5). The miracle of salvation is that our sins are placed on His account, and His righteousness is deposited in our accounts. "And be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith" (Philippians 3:9).

But the Scriptures also teach that righteousness is not only something we receive; it is something we do. "Blessed are they that keep judgment, and he that doeth righteousness at all times" (Psalm 106:3). "If ye know that he is righteous, ye know that every one that doeth righteousness is born of him" (1 John 2:29). "Little children, let no man deceive you: he that doeth righteousness is righteous, even as he is righteous" (1 John 3:7).

Our love for God is protected by a breastplate of imputed righteousness we receive the day we are saved and our obedient righteousness on every day thereafter. When we live in harmony with the righteous covering salvation provides, we clothe ourselves and our love for Him with protection from an enemy who desires to destroy our hearts.

III. THE LUNGS NEED PROTECTION

In the natural body, a breastplate protects not only the heart but also the lungs. It is worth noting that physically these two organs work together to rejuvenate the blood. Blood depleted of oxygen enters the upper right chamber (atrium) of the heart and then flows downward into the right ventricle. The contraction of the heart pushes the blood through the pulmonary arteries to the lungs. There the carbon dioxide is removed from the blood and fresh oxygen is supplied to it. The renewed blood returns to the heart via the pulmonary veins, and is then propelled from the left side of the heart through the aorta to carry its life throughout the body.

Part of what God's righteousness protects and fosters is this process of purification: the removal of that which is damaging and unclean from one's spiritual life and the insertion of that which is positive and life-giving. When individuals live in submission to the righteousness of Christ and frame their choices with

consideration of its covering, they are positioned for God both to cleanse them from negative and poisonous influences and to instill in them positive and beneficial spiritual elements.

Our hearts and spiritual “systems” can easily become corrupted by exposure to the world in which we live. Hurts of life and disappointments in people can produce negative consequences in us. Such things can take root and grow in our hearts. “Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled” (Hebrews 12:15).

When such roots spring up and bear fruit, the harvest is one of evil. It is striking to realize that from the same heart capable of manifesting pure love for God can come all manner of corrupt things as well. When Jesus and His disciples were criticized for eating with unwashed hands, He responded with this teaching:

“And he said, That which cometh out of the man, that defileth the man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness: all these evil things come from within, and defile the man” (Mark 7:20–23).

Our hearts can be founts of uncorrupted love toward God, or they can become a source of iniquity. Gratefully there is a covering of righteousness that protects us. God searches our hearts, examining both our methods and our motives, our actions and our attitudes. “Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Psalm 139:23–24).

When uncleanness is discovered in our hearts, we can repent and submit ourselves to the work of righteousness. God is willing both to forgive us and to remove from our hearts that corruption by His blood. “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). He then will write into our

hearts new laws and new ways to enable us to keep our love for Him true and clean. “For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves: which shew the work of the law written in their hearts” (Romans 2:14–15).

In the same manner a natural breastplate would protect the organs that purify the blood, so the breastplate of righteousness protects this purification process by Christ’s blood in our lives. His righteousness and our right living allow for an ongoing process of God’s removal of all things corrupt and unclean from our hearts and of His writing in and on our hearts His laws and principles.

IV. DAVID’S RIGHTEOUSNESS (BREASTPLATE)

As a great example of these principles of the heart and its affections being of utmost importance and of the need to protect it by righteousness, one would do well to examine David’s life. He is, of course, one of the most beloved and preached-about players on Scripture’s stage. But more than that, he was a man—an imperfect and flawed individual seeking to serve God.

We certainly know of his character flaws and how they were openly manifest, for no lesser voice than the eternal record of God’s Word records the sordid details of his affair with his neighbor’s wife, Bathsheba. During a season when he should have been in battle, he viewed her bathing and initiated immoral contact with her. He then attempted to cover his sin by having her husband, Uriah, brought home from battle. When David’s plan failed to bring the desired result, he sent Uriah back to the battle along with orders to bring about his death.

David was an adulterer. He was a liar. He was a murderer. Yet he was something else as well. “And when he [God] had removed him [Saul], he raised up unto them David to be their king; to whom also he gave testimony, and said, I have found David the son of Jesse, a man after mine own heart, which shall fulfill all my will” (Acts 13:22).

It is fascinating that this one who committed such evil acts is noted as being a man after God’s heart! The key to this

apparent contradiction is found in part in David's response when confronted with his sin. He offered a sincere prayer of repentance, which is recorded in Psalm 51. One can hear the tears and the brokenness coming through every line. In the midst of that prayer he made this request: "Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me" (Psalm 51:10). David recognized the importance of having a right heart, for in its absence he would be destined to repeat his sinful ways. But if God placed within him a clean heart, he could properly demonstrate his love to God.

Further David sought to protect and keep that clean heart by a breastplate of righteousness. David knew this process of restoration would not be complete without the work of righteousness in his life. Note the connection between the two in this verse: "He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake" (Psalm 23:3).

David did not view righteousness as an optional blessing; he viewed it as an absolute requirement. "LORD, who shall abide in thy tabernacle? who shall dwell in thy holy hill? He that walketh uprightly, and worketh righteousness, and speaketh the truth in his heart" (Psalm 15:1-2). "Blessed are they that keep judgment, and he that doeth righteousness at all times" (Psalm 106:3).

David's commitment to "work" righteousness and to "do" righteousness was the essential daily component of protecting his heart. When he was confronted with unrighteousness in his life, he quickly fell on his face to deal with it repentantly. Failure to do so would have left his heart and love for God vulnerable.

One's breastplate of righteousness is personal. When David prepared to battle Goliath, Saul offered him the use of his (Saul's) armor. However, because David was only a youth and Saul was head and shoulders above all the others in the army, Saul's armor simply did not fit. A breastplate could not be transferred from one to another. Each soldier needed his own breastplate.

In like fashion, each of us must have a personal salvation experience, which gives God's righteousness to us, and a personal commitment to ongoing righteous living that enacts

His righteousness through us. We cannot rely on the collective righteousness of the church or on the righteous breastplate of a family member, a spiritual leader, or a close friend. Their breastplates protect their hearts. We must each have our own!

V. RIGHTEOUSNESS PROTECTS AND INSPIRES PASSION

In that the breastplate of righteousness protects one's heart, and in that the heart is the biblical seat of emotions, it is accurate to conclude that our righteous covering and righteous conduct protect our passion for the things of God. So long as one's heart is safe, the desires and the affections of that heart are protected. That to which we are willing to devote our lives is sheltered and filtered through the righteousness of God, ensuring that our passion is focused appropriately.

A. Passion in Prayer

Communication with God is of paramount importance and must be approached with delight rather than obligation. A righteous heart that loves God passionately will compel a person to seek God with deep intensity. "O God, thou art my God; early will I seek thee: my soul thirsteth for thee, my flesh longeth for thee in a dry and thirsty land, where no water is" (Psalm 63:1). That type of hunger and desperation for Him will affect our prayer lives.

"The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much" (James 5:16). In part this is true because a heart protected by righteousness not only will drive us to seek God but also will direct us as we do. Such a heart will intuitively ask for the right things. For when we are delighted to simply be in His presence, He places all the right types of desires in our hearts. (See Psalm 37:4.)

B. Passion for Mission

Every born-again believer is to be active in the work of God. God places us into particular roles in His work as it pleases Him and for the good of His kingdom. Finding the place in which we are most effective and feel fulfilled can be a challenge sometimes. However, one of the keys to finding the right location for our involvement is to discover our talents and gifts and what we enjoy doing.

God places a passion within us for certain aspects of Kingdom work, and this is generally to prepare us for what we are to do. That is not to suggest that because we may not particularly enjoy some aspect of service, we are exempt from responsibility. Each of us is to pray, to witness, to give, and so forth, regardless of how we may feel about it. But generally God will place a desire in us to devote our talents to some particular ministry function in the church, and our responsibility is to protect that passion with a righteous breastplate. Failure to do so can allow lesser pursuits to distract us until we no longer properly serve the One whose righteousness should clothe us in the first place.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

Living as we do in an extremely unrighteous world, maintaining and wearing a breastplate of righteousness is a practice of intention, not of convenience. Such protection is the result of purposeful and wise choices. These include choices about how to utilize time, choices about entertainment options, choices regarding financial expenditures, choices involving appearance, and a host of others.

REFLECTIONS

- In that loving God is the first or highest commandment, what are some commandments we sometimes mistakenly place before that one? Why do you believe we do so? Discuss.
- Our spiritual hearts are vulnerable without protection. In what ways does righteousness guard our hearts? In what ways does unrighteousness make our hearts vulnerable?
- The breastplate would also protect the lungs, which are the site for the removal of the bad and the insertion of the good. What are some “toxic” items in your life that righteousness would help remove? What steps can you take this week to remove them from your world?
- In that David patterns this lesson’s content well, select one of his psalms and purpose to pray it into your life daily this week.
- What is your mission in the church? What do you have a passion for? How can you begin to fulfill that passion through ministry in God’s kingdom?

And you will have to choose! No one can choose for you. Each child of God will confront a myriad of crossroad moments when he or she must decide between righteousness and unrighteousness, between the carnal and the spiritual, and between pleasing the flesh or pleasing the Spirit. The results of these choices will either bind more closely the breastplate that protects our hearts or cause us to set it aside, leaving our hearts vulnerable.

It may not happen in a moment, but over time even our love for God, which springs from the heart, can be affected. Though it might seem hard to believe, the Word of God makes it clear that exposure to unrighteousness has a diminishing result on love. “And because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold” (Matthew 24:12).

Therefore if a child of God wants his love for God to remain passionate, he must actively choose to guard his heart with a breastplate made of the righteousness of God by ordering his world in fashions to please God. He must ensure that every decision he makes harmonizes with the principles of God’s Word. Everything about his life, from his clothing to his habits to his speech, must honor God. Making such choices provides the safest environment for a love for God to grow and flourish until He comes. ■