

“BACK TO SCHOOL: I - SUPPLIES”
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Ephesians 6:10-20

Matthew 6:5-14

If you're a parent, grandparent or guardian of a child in school, you know that in August your wallet takes a major hit! It's school supply time! Not only that, but it's new clothes, new shoes, new sports equipment, new musical instruments – well, the list goes on and on.

I was looking a while ago at a school supply list for one of my nephews and it was astonishing what they were expected to bring – not only pens, pencils and papers, but hand sanitizer, tissues and other such things. Oh, have things changed since I was a child.

I remember how exciting it was to get all of those brand, spanking new supplies – they smelled good, they looked good, the crayons were all nice and sharp, there were no marks on the notebook. It was fun to wear new clothes and new shoes, and it was fun to carry your brand new, metal lunch box, especially if it had your favorite TV show characters on it.

And to show you how really old I am – here's another bit of supply for the school year. Who here knows what this was used for? That's right – covering our books to keep them clean. There was an art to cutting the grocery bag and making it fit over the book just right – and of course, after about the first day, it was clean no more because you and your friends wrote all over it!

Ah, school supplies – things that we need to do the best job we can as students. Every parent, grandparent and guardian will do the best they can to make sure their child has the supplies he or she needs to be the best student they can be.

You know, no matter what task you face in life, whether it is being a student or anything else, you need to be equipped with the right supplies. And that includes being a faithful Christian. It doesn't just happen. You're not a faithful Christian just because - you're a faithful Christian because you seek to grow daily in your walk with Christ, and to do that, you need some supplies. And blessedly, they're gifts that God has given us.

There are many of them, and the Apostle Paul talks about many of them in the passage from Ephesians we read this morning. He describes them as the “full armor of God.” He admonishes us to “put on the full armor of God,” not just to grow in faith, but also to face the trials and temptations of daily life. And boy, do we face

trials and temptations these days – trials and temptations that threaten to wear us down, and to actually lose faith.

Just look at some of the events of this past week and you'll know what I'm talking about – the stock market on a roller coaster ride that leaves many people frightened for their financial future; the shooting of a television crew by a disgruntled former co-worker; raging wildfires in the west threatening homes and lives; crime and drug problems in our own backyard. Put on top of that the kind of pressure and stress we live under every day due to our own relationship problems, stress, financial hardships, overscheduling. Paul was right – a suit of armor is about what we need to face everything we have to face, let alone strive to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ!

But friends, a suit of armor is what we have – a gift from our good and gracious God – a suit of armor made up of so many supplies, if you will, supplies that will enable us to face whatever life throws our way – and not only to face life, but to thrive and be fruitful.

So today, I want to talk about just three of those supplies, because I think they are perhaps some of the most important ones God gives us.

And the first is the Word of God – the Bible. Now, I would venture to say that virtually everyone in this room probably has a Bible (and, if you don't, we can remedy that). The question is: how often do you read it? Are you putting on that piece of the armor of God daily?

I hope so, but I also know how easy it is not to. Oh, we all have good intentions especially when we first get a Bible. We're going to read through it, word by word, but after about getting to say, Leviticus or Numbers, we give up the ghost.

Which is too bad, because the Bible is a living, breathing document that has as much to say to our lives today as it has to any people at any time in history. Pick up the Bible and read a Gospel lesson and you'll discover it speaks to your life right now. Read a psalm and you'll see how it touches your heart.

I read recently of a young man who moved into a town in New Jersey with his wife early in their marriage and they started attending a church nearby. One day, one of those pastors encouraged him to use a daily devotional.

Listen to what he said about the experience: "It was during that time that I began to read a small portion of the Bible each day. The Bible had always been intimidating to me. A massive text, filled with unpronounceable names, I would start at the beginning, read a few chapters from Genesis, but quickly lose interest. But this new approach of reading a selected passage, with an accompanying interpretive text, enabled me to begin to hear the message of Jesus Christ. It was through these nightly readings that my relationship with God became permanent. It is the Bible that has brought me closer to God, and changed the context in which I lead my life."

He continues: “Having begun to read the Bible, you will soon be able to find God in all that you do. In your home, in your workplace, in your town, in your relationships, you will find the presence of God once you start looking for Him. It will change the way you treat other people, the way you approach decision making, the way you handle any situation.” (Chris Brown, *How Can I Find God?*, p. 29-30)

Wow! He’s right, though. Spend time in the Word of God and it will change you – for the better. Maybe you can start the way he did, by using a daily devotional like *The Upper Room*. Or maybe you can join a Sunday School class in a couple of weeks, or take the Disciple study with Pastor Ray.

It doesn’t matter how you do it, just do it! Open your Bible and read it, and let God speak to you through its words. You will be amazed how much you learn about yourself, you will surely be strengthened for the journey of life, and you will absolutely grow closer to God.

A second supply that Paul commends you use is prayer. He says “Pray in the Spirit at all times.” Oh, is there a better way to draw close to God than through prayer – talking, listening, learning, trusting?

Once again, people sometimes say that they don’t pray because they don’t know the right way to do it. Well, as I have often been quoted as saying, “There is no wrong way to pray.” Simply be still and be in God’s presence and talk to Him, and then listen. Lift up your concerns for others and for yourself. Share your dreams with Him, your challenges, your struggles. Laugh with God, cry with Him, even shout at Him – He can take it. (Check out some of the psalms, if you don’t believe me – there’s a lot of shouting at God in them!)

If you think you’re not good at prayer on your own, pray with someone else – find a prayer partner or prayer group. Most assuredly, be a part of the prayer chain here at church – it is a powerful thing.

Just ask Mary and Bill Mackie about that. Most of you know that Bill Mackie was in a serious farm accident a few weeks ago, and while he was still trapped, still in the midst of the rescue operation, our prayer chain went into action – full force, and oh, what mighty things came of it. I talked to Mary the other day to get her permission to talk about them in my sermon today, and she told me how well Bill is doing. Where he very easily could have lost his life, and at the least, his leg, instead Bill is now in the Wilmington Hospital at their fine rehab center learning how to walk again with his surgically repaired leg, and Mary is right by his side cheering him on. And both of them know that, but by the grace of God, and through the power of prayer of so many of us and others, it could be a very different story.

Prayer works! Prayer is powerful, and prayer draws us into God’s embrace and strengthens us for the journey of life. It is a gift God supplies to us, and it’s up to us whether to choose to use that supply or ignore it. Oh, may we use it regularly and in abundance.

Finally, a third gift from God – a supply He calls us to use – worship. When you think about it, is there a more vivid way of showing our love for and commitment to God, than coming to worship? Especially in this day and age, when coming to worship seems to be out of vogue!

What message do you think your neighbors get when they see you pull out of your driveway on Sunday mornings every week at the same time? They know you're committed to something, and if they know you at all, they know it's church. What a statement of faith you're making by coming to church.

But more than that, what a statement of faith you're making to God Himself. Because, first and foremost, we worship to give thanks to God for all that He has done and continues to do for us.

So we come and we say thank you for life and family and friends and work. We come and say thank you for getting me through this tough week, or this tough situation, or this stress. We come and say thank you for your love which never lets me go, a love that sent Jesus for me and my salvation. First and foremost, we come in worship to give thanks to God.

But then, we find we also receive – we receive inspiration or challenge, we receive peace, we receive fellowship and friendship, we receive blessing upon blessing. And we leave here in better shape than when we came – ready to face another week.

Yet, worship attendance continues to be a problem in churches around the world. Pastor Bill Hybels, the pastor of one of the largest churches in our country, wrote about this in his book called *Simplify*. Listen to what he has to say:

“As a pastor, I am struck by how often I hear the comment, ‘I almost didn't come to church today.’ It's usually after I've given a message, that, by God's grace, spoke to some people in a powerful way, and they are telling me how timely the sermon was. ‘And to think I almost didn't come,’ they'll say.

One Sunday recently, a guy I was talking to used that phrase several times. Finally I took the bait (Hybels writes). ‘Really?’ I teased him. ‘You almost didn't come today? ‘Church’ isn't on your regular calendar? So, on Sunday mornings, you and your family start flipping coins to decide whether or not you're going to show up?’

During the next service, several more people made the exact same comment, and I became even more emphatic about the importance of regular church attendance – and how it greatly enhances the likelihood we will stay connected with God.

By the final service that day, my intensity on this topic was pretty high. I might have upped the volume just a bit as I challenged our congregation: ‘Really? You don't have church on your calendar?’

From the upper deck of our auditorium (Hybels writes), a little kid yelled out: ‘Nope!’ He outed his family – and in church! I thought, *That kid’s gonna be sitting in a time-out chair until he’s about fifteen!*

Hybels finishes: “People laughed, as did I, but the truth is, it breaks my heart when parents don’t commit themselves – and their kids – to weekly church attendance. ‘Nope, it’s not really on our calendar’ is a far-too-common refrain. ‘We’re still flipping a coin every week. Some weeks we come; some weeks we don’t.’

If you want to hear more from God, be where His Word is taught. Regularly. Weekly. (Bill Hybels, *Simplify*, p. 42)

Hybels is absolutely, positively right. If you want to stay close to God and grow to be the person of faith you can be, come to worship – regularly, weekly.

So Bible reading, prayer and worship – three things God supplies to us for this Christian journey of faith we’re on. As we stand here at the start of another school year, just a couple of weeks away from the fall kickoff for our church, will you commit to use these supplies that God has given you in a fuller fashion than you have in the past? Will you read your Bible, alone or with others; will you pray for yourself and others; will you be in worship regularly? This is a great time to renew your commitment in all of those areas.

Let me finish with one final image. All throughout my life, I’ve been blessed to spend time in and around New York City because my father’s family is from that area. So, even from a young age, I’ve visited wonderful places there, especially museums. And one that stands out in my mind is the Metropolitan Museum of Art – and the reason it stands out in my mind this week is remembering the gallery that contains a huge number of suits of armor. It is an amazing place.

And what is so amazing about it, is that when you look closely at these suits of armor you realize that every part of the warrior’s body is protected – every part – from head to toe. I think that’s why Paul uses that imagery in his words this morning – for Paul knows that putting on all those things – all those supplies from God that he talks about – will cover us from head to toe with God’s protection, and will keep us in his care as we face our daily lives.

So my friends, as the hymn says, “Soldiers of Christ, arise, and put your armor on!” Arm yourself with the gifts that God has given you, to face life with strength and courage, and so that you can be the disciple He has called you to be. May it be so.

Amen.