

An aptly named martial arts instructor named Buck Buckmaster is a teacher of an "extreme cane defense" course or, as some of his ninja nanas call it, "Cane Fu." Buckmaster started teaching classes for seniors after his own 69-year-old mother was attacked. So he decided to help seniors learn to be aware of their surroundings, and to avoid putting themselves in vulnerable scenarios, but, if that fails, they also learn how to use their canes to hook a neck, bust a shin, and crack a skull!

Speaking of canes and crutches, a lot of people in our world look at people of faith as a bunch of vulnerable, and weak people, who are easily taken advantage of and aren't strong enough to get by without it. Jesse Ventura, the former professional wrestler who became governor of Minnesota, once said, "Organized religion is a sham and a crutch for weak-minded people who need strength in numbers."

So how should we respond to such criticism? Like Cane Fu Christians! If faith is a cane, or crutch we carry around with us every day because we need it, then it's also a powerful weapon we can use in navigating a world in which evil prowls around like a roaring lion waiting to pounce. Theological thugs, punk philosophers, and Hollywood hoodlums may try to snatch our faith away like grandma's purse, tempting us into the shadows, but the Cane Fu Christian knows that he or she has the proper weapon at hand at all times to be used wisely.

That's the point that Paul makes at the end of his letter to the Ephesians, which most scholars believe was actually a letter to be circulated to different churches in a broad geographical area. Like a good sensei, Paul instructs these churches to avoid the dark corners of pagan philosophy and practice, and instead to "live as children of light" who "take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them,"

But if avoidance doesn't work, they need to be prepared to parry the assault of evil in the form of temptation, doubt and persecution. In our lesson this morning, Paul holds up a list of virtues that Christians should carry with them and lean on every day -- virtues that are already locked and loaded in the life of the Christian and can double as defensive weapons for defending the faith when the time comes.

Paul uses the image of a Roman soldier's battle dress as a metaphor for the "whole armor of God" which can be used to "stand against the wiles of the devil." While most of Paul's audience would have been very familiar with the sight of Roman soldiers walking around in full armor, that kind of protection wasn't something that many of them would put on before heading to the local market. Still, Paul urges them to put on a defensive mindset, and to understand that they actually have significant protection at hand if they know how to use it.

Cane Fu teaches seniors to identify potential threats as the first principle of their training. Similarly, Paul reminds his churches that the real threat to their spiritual safety isn't "enemies of blood and flesh" but the "rulers," "authorities," and "cosmic powers" that constitute the "spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." These forces lurk in the shadows of "this present darkness," but can be defeated by those who are prepared and have done everything, to stand firm."

Paul then goes on to list several different pieces of the Roman battle dress as metaphors for the kind of everyday carry items the church should always have at hand individually and collectively. With the exception of the sword, all of these are defensive objects, designed for protection. The "belt of truth," for example, is something common that many of us carry close at hand. It is the truth of the gospel that enables us to deflect the various untruths that we are bombarded with every day. When we are immersed in the truth, it leaves no room for the devil to attack. After all, Satan is known as the father of lies, is he not?

Before a Roman soldier put on his armor, he put a belt around his waist. This held his garments together and served as a place on which to hang his armor. The belt of truth should therefore be one of the first things we put on as Christians and along with the reality of the Gospel we possess, we should also maintain a sense of subjective truth, integrity, and faithfulness. And just as a soldier's belt or sash gave them ease and freedom of movement, so truth gives us freedom and assurance with one's self, others, and God.

The "breastplate of righteousness" protects the heart of the Christian. One of the ways that criminals often try to lure their elderly victims is by playing on their innate sense of wanting to be "nice." The devil often uses a similar tactic in tempting us toward things that look good and inviting on the outside, but will trap us in the darkness if we're not careful.

"Righteousness" for Paul is a term that equates to right standing, or right living. And when we possess a deep sense of right and wrong we can often avoid giving in to temptation, and it can help us identify the devil's scams when we see them. After all, just as a soldier's breastplate protected his chest from an enemy's attack, so sanctifying, righteous living, guards a believer's heart against the assaults of the devil.

One of the most basic principles of self-defense is to always travel with a buddy. There is strength in numbers, and criminals are less likely to approach two people than one person alone. In talking about the "shield of faith," Paul describes a similar tactic. Roman shields were best employed in a phalanx, a group of soldiers, which provided mutual protection against attack, particularly from arrows. The shields were often covered with leather, which was soaked in water before battle to extinguish flaming arrows fired by enemy archers. Similarly, we are washed in the waters of baptism to protect us from the flaming arrows that Satan fires our way!

Keeping the faith involves the cohesion of Christians together in a community of mutual support, instruction, and accountability. That's one of the reasons we gather together as the church. There is strength in numbers as we worship and work together, watch out for one another, and cover our friends when they are under attack from the evil one.

But, if and when, the time comes and we're under attack, then it's time to use the best offensive weapon we have: "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God." When Jesus was tempted by Satan in the wilderness, it was clear that he had spent a lifetime leaning on the Scriptures, and when Satan tried to use them out of context to lure him into sin, Jesus was ready to parry with the gospel truth. And the more we study the Scriptures and take them to heart, carrying them with us every day, the more ready we will be to parry the devil's lies with the Word of God.

In addition to these everyday carry items, Paul urges us to "pray in the Spirit at all times" and to "keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints." Praying without ceasing keeps our souls always alert to the world around us, and its needs, opportunities and dangers. When the enemy attacks—and on all occasions—Christians are to pray continually in the Spirit. And Paul's words, "With all kinds of prayers and requests" suggests the thoroughness and intensity of their praying. Like reliable soldiers, they are to keep alert at all times, literally, "in all persistence." Their requests are to be for all the saints, because of Satan's spiritual warfare against Christ and the church.

If Christianity is a crutch or a cane, it's a pretty powerful one for giving the devil a serious dent in the proverbial skull. May we learn how to always lean on Jesus no matter the circumstance we find ourselves in, and each morning when we wake up and get out of bed, let us seek to become Cane Fu ninjas for Christ! Thanks be to God. Amen.