

Romans 13:8-14
(Psalm 118:28-29; Matthew 22:34-40)
“The Heart of the Matter”

Introduction

We’ve all experienced it – the restless night before a special day. The occasion may be different for each – an exam, a job interview, a surgery, a battle. We sleep fitfully, waking often to check our watch. How long until dawn? Long before first light, in anticipation of the day, we get up, cast aside our bedclothes and dress for the day.

That is the image Paul employs in our text, a text in which he has been exhorting us to live lives transformed by the power of God’s grace, lives filled with God’s Spirit, no longer conformed to this world and its values. He is seeking to inject a note of urgency into his teaching: “the hour has come for you to wake up from sleep. For salvation is nearer to you now than when you first believed. The night is far gone; the day is at hand” (13:11-12).

Paul wants us to stop living as if there would always be another day to get things right, another day to settle our affairs with God and man, another day for becoming the kind of new people that Christ has redeemed us to be. Get up, Paul says. Get up and face the day. And face it unencumbered by debts unpaid and deeds undone. Only those who know what time it is will understand what Paul means.

When Paul uses the word “time” in verse eleven, he does not use the Greek word for ordinary time, *kronos* from which we get our word chronometer (timepiece), but rather he uses the word *kairos*, which refers to a special time of great significance. Here he refers to the present time in the light of Christ’s entering history and beginning the end times. People speculate about when the end times are coming, but according to the New Testament, the end times began when Jesus came into the world, and those who are his already have eternal life. So there is an overlapping of eras, of normal time and of God’s redemptive time, for those of us in Christ.

But the point should be clear to all of us, even to those not yet in Christ: every day we draw nearer to the day of our death, to the day of reckoning, of giving account, and to live as if that day would never come is to live as a fool. So Paul cries out, Wake up! Don’t let the day of the Lord find you encumbered by bad debts and bad deeds. Don’t let the Master come and find you sleeping. Don’t let the bridegroom come and find you without a wedding garment. All such biblical pictures are meant to shake us awake and move us to action in laying claim to all that Christ has won for us.

Paul begins by building upon what he just said in verse seven, “Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due.” Now he says, “Owe no one anything, except to love each other.”

Body

1. Paul encourages us to live unencumbered by bad debts (13:8-10).

“Owe no one anything, except to love each other” (13:8).

Does Paul mean that we should never borrow money? No, e.g., year of Jubilee and Jesus’ parable of the talents both presume debts incurred and paid.

What, then, does Paul mean? That we must be diligent to repay what we owe, whether taxes or revenue or honor or respect, (13:7).

Why is this the heart of the matter? The one debt that we can never finish with and say, “No more – I’ve paid that off,” is the debt of love, owed to my neighbor – in other words, to everyone whom the Lord places in my life (see the parable of the Good Samaritan). This is at the heart of the meaning of human life. It is why God made us, for loving friendship with him and with one another. The law is really just a picture of love in action, and when we love well, we keep the law without ever having to think of it.

2. He then encourages us to live unencumbered by bad deeds (13:11-14).

“Cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light” (13:12).

What are “the works of darkness”? These, Paul illustrates in terms of sins of the flesh and sins of the spirit: the first being a misuse of our bodies which God desires as his dwelling, the flesh in which he still walks the world and through which his kingdom comes and his will is done on earth as it is in heaven, and the second being the ways we fight and wound one another rather than loving each other well.

What is “the armor of light”? It is the life of love lived out in word and deed, the ways that we encourage and build one another up, helping rather than hurting, willing to sacrifice for the sake of another rather than fighting to get one’s own way. It is supremely expressed in the life of Jesus, who told his disciples that he came, “not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28). So Paul summarizes by saying, “Put on the Lord Jesus Christ” (13:14), in other words, let Christ possess your life.

How do we cast off the first and put on the second? It begins with one’s mindset: “Make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires” (13:14). This is simply one more example of Paul’s earlier warning that “to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace” (8:6). Paul develops this same idea in several of his letters because it is so crucial to

living out the life of love. For example, he writes, “Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God” (Colossians 3:2-3). Paul wants us to give our bodies to the Lord as a “living sacrifice” (12:1), but insists that this not be merely an outward act of religious conformity, but rather the result of an inner transformation from a renewed mind (12:2).

Thus, the works of darkness are those violations of God’s law that result from a failure of love. And the armor of light is the life of Christ, given to us both as his righteousness credited to us and as his Spirit living through us.

Conclusion

If we truly love someone, we should never have to be encouraged to be thoughtful and kind, generous and self-sacrificial toward that person. If those things do not come naturally, then it is a real question whether or not we love anyone but ourselves. If we live as if our lives would never end, as if we will always have tomorrow to set things aright, we live as fools, and – unless awakened from our folly – will one day be taken by surprise, and it will be too late.

Do you know what time it is? Do you realize that “salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. The night is far gone; the day is at hand”? If you do, then “let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.” Don’t let the most important day of your life find you encumbered by debts unpaid and deeds undone.

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