

Time to Wake Up

Romans 13:8-14

⁸ Owe nothing to anyone except the debt to love one another. For the one who loves another has fulfilled the Law. ⁹ For the commandment, “You shall not commit adultery,” “You shall not murder,” “You shall not steal,” “You shall not covet,” and whatever other commandment there may be is summed up in this word, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” ¹⁰ Love does no evil to the neighbor. Therefore Love is the fulfillment of the Law. ¹¹ Besides this, you know the time: that the hour has come for you to be raised from sleep. For salvation now is nearer to us than when we believed. ¹² The night is far gone, and the Day is at hand. Therefore let us cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on us the armor of light. ¹³ Let us walk properly, as in the Day, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. ¹⁴ But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

In the Name of God: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

1. Introduction.

One of the most important moments in life is one that happens at least once, perhaps several times each day: the moment of waking from sleep. Every morning (or, if you are a college student, every afternoon) you and I emerge from one realm into another. And no matter how real the dream world may seem, no matter how vivid, scary, pleasurable, or perplexing the activities you were going about in your sleep, it is all dwarfed by the joys, pains, worries, and people of waking life.

The Apostle Paul in our reading from Romans this morning describes the whole Christian life as the act of being awakened from sleep: the dying of ourselves to an unreal world of our own sinful creation and the coming alive of ourselves to a new world and life of God’s creation: the life of love.

You see, until this point in Romans, Paul has gone from discussing the Christian’s responsibility to the political powers that be to the Christian’s responsibility within the economic system of which he finds himself. The believer is to owe nothing to anyone: he is to be completely debt free with one single exception: the one obligation that every Christian has and which can never go away, says Paul, is “to love one another,” that is, “to love your neighbor as yourself.” If we as followers of Jesus fulfill and discharge our debt and duty to truly love each other, we will have fulfilled the law of Christ, having entered into the life that God has intended for us.

But Paul knows us better than this, and he then calls us to life in Christ in another way: by locating us within the story of God and the world. “Salvation,” says Paul, “is nearer to us than when we first believed.” That is to say, that the hope for which we have hoped against hope, the end of this world and the beginning of the New Heavens and the New Earth, the judgment of sinners and the vindication of the saints, and our own Resurrection to Christ’s glory in order to reign with him forever:

it has drawn even nearer to us now because Christ's return is even closer than it was when we first came to him.

In fact, Paul draws on the biblical imagery of night and day to pinpoint exactly where we are on the timetable of the Return of our Lord. Paul says, "The night is far gone, the day is at hand." That is, that if the dawn, the sunrise, is the Coming of the Lord Jesus, the "Sun of Righteousness that rises with healing in its wings" (Malachi 4:2), that "Dayspring from on high" (Luke 1:78), then we are now at that time when the whole horizon is alight with the glow of his radiance, when the darkness and gloom and chill of the night is almost a faint memory, and where the only thing left for the full glory of the morning itself is the appearance of the sun itself.

And this is why Paul calls us to wake from sleep, to turn from one reality and world to the truer one: because the Day, the Day of the Lord, is at hand. Wake up lest dawn catch you sleeping, wake up because there is true life to be had, wake up because waking life is truly worth living!

And so, this very day, the First Sunday of Advent, Paul gives us the same command: **Wake up and live because your salvation is at hand!** But how then do we do this? How do we live waking life in light of the coming dawn? Paul boils it down to two basic parts also common to each of us: taking off clothing and putting clothing on. And though I may not be a fashion expert, this seems very much like something that even I can grasp. It is the basics of these two disciplines (and make no mistake: they demand hard work) that we will spend the rest of our time examining this morning.

2. The Putting Off.

The way Paul sees it, **we must put off the works of darkness.** Waking up from a dream requires that we take off the perspectives, the ways of thinking, even the habits that were adopted during the dream. Much like clothing must be put off before new clothing can be put on, so we must be stripped before God, relieved of the works of darkness, before we can truly live in the light of the coming dawn.

This can be difficult, especially with vivid dreams. My mother has often woken up furious with my father for something that he had supposedly done in her dream, yet which had no basis in real life. Nevertheless, it would take a while after waking up for her to stop smacking him for his supposed crimes in her dream. Even awake, when the dream is vivid enough, we must actively suppress the paradigm of the dream lest we be controlled by unreality in our waking state.

And this, beloved, is what God calls us to do. It is an active discipline, a daily battle, to take off the old attitudes, habits, patters of thought, and besetting sins and to put a stake through the heart of them. Not a day can or must go by without the terrible,

painful job of removing the old sin that clings and sticks so closely to our identity, to who think that we are.

Now there are two parts of putting off the works of darkness that Paul mentions here in this passage. The first level involves the battle against the deeds of the flesh, the cessation of these behaviors: not walking in them. Now, Paul gets straight to the point in this passage: he calls for an end to a series of sins, most of which we blush to mention in public, but which characterize the whole of our sinful nature which clings so closely.

Paul calls first for an end to orgies and drunkenness. It may seem like a no-brainer that Christians should not participate in these addictive behaviors in which self-control is tossed to the wind. And yet, Paul puts his finger on them because at the heart of the old nature lies a desire to be free which leads ultimately to enslavement. Instead, says Paul, Christians are to put off these practices and thereby find true freedom.

Paul calls second for an end to sexual immorality and sensuality. Unlike the previous pair of behaviors, these highlight the factor of temptation rather than of enslavement. Sex sells, and it has always sold. Sexual temptation is something which every single one of us can be easily confronted with at one time or another, precisely because God created it to be such a powerful force for good and beauty in his creation: for forging married relationships, producing children, and bringing glory to him. But when sin enters the picture, sex promises fulfillment but delivers emptiness, it promises pleasure but brings sorrow, it promises companionship but brings loneliness, it promises intimacy but brings distance. And all this is wrapped up under a blanket of promised secrecy which, at the very least, one day will be yanked off of those who succumb to it. All this is because it pulls us away from God into other desires and appetites that ultimately can only be satisfied in him.

Paul calls third for an end to quarreling and jealousy. These exhibit the worst and starkest of evils in this whole list: they show the desire to be in the first place, in the center. The person who is controlled by a quarreling, argumentative attitude in general is one who must always be recognized as right, as supreme, as the best. The jealous person desires the best (or all) things because they must be first in place and possession. And yet, those who desire to be first will find themselves cast out unless they place God and his Christ at the center of their lives.

All told, the picture painted by Paul of the old us that needs to be put off is stark and bleak: by nature we are driven into temptation by our lusts, controlled and enslaved to our passions and patterns, all in an effort to be at the center of our lives. This does not just characterize these six sins: it characterizes the whole life of sin. And of course, all of it must go. It must be put off.

But Paul then takes all this to the next level. “Make no provision for the flesh,” he says, “to gratify its desires.” Paul is saying here that we are due not just for a change of behavior, but a change of heart. “No provision for the flesh” means that we are not to plan for, hope for, or hold out for the case that we might fall into sin. To fight against sin on this level means that we are restructuring our life to make sure that we do not fall into sin, that we are preparing, planning, and hoping for obedience to God, and not to the flesh. And though we may sin, and though it may cost us more, our intention has been to serve God and to bring glory to his Name.

Having surveyed the act of “putting off” the works of darkness, this may jolly well seem like an impossible task. And so it would be, except for one thing: in Christ our deeds of darkness were “put off” on him on the cross. When our Lord Jesus died, we died too. Our guilt was put to death as God’s wrath was satisfied, but our old selves with our sins and lusts and abhorrent nooks and crannies were also put to death. And so, says Paul, “if you have died with Christ ... put to death therefore what is earthly in you” (Colossians 3:3, 5). It is God’s grace alone, realized tangibly and finally for us on the cross, which allows us to “put off” the works of darkness.

You can find a perfect illustration of this in C.S. Lewis’ *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. There the central character Eustace has been magically turned into a dragon, a poignant image of his actually rather beastly character. To become a boy he must take off his skin, shed it like scales, but with his own claws he can never go deep enough. It takes the talons of a lion, the Christ-like Aslan, which can tear deeply enough through the dragon scales, to liberate Eustace and return to his boyish state, albeit rather chastened in the process.

And this is what God does in our life. As we await the dawn he wakes us from sleep (tossing cold water on our faces if he has to), because the reality that he brings can be tasted and lived now, and it is high time for us to put aside the dream world and live in the light-filled, life-filled world of a New Creation which will be unleashed when our Lord Jesus Christ returns with power and with glorious Majesty to judge the living and the dead and to bring salvation to those who call upon his Name.

3. The Putting On.

The way Paul sees it, even more important than putting off the works of darkness, **we must put on the armor of light.** Nature abhors a vacuum, as they say, and human nature needs to be clothed in something: it will be clothed either in the works of darkness or in the armor of light, but it will not be naked for long. Paul therefore here calls every Christian to put on the armor of light.

Of course, armor is better than regular clothing, at least if you are going into battle. My preferred ensemble of Oxford shirt, sweater, and blue jeans will afford me little protection against battle axes, broad swords, machine guns, grenade shrapnel, or

ninjas. Rather, warriors go into combat with the seriousness that their enemies demand: armed to the hilt.

And this reminds us that the Christian life *always* means war, means battle, means a fight to the death. As the Puritan pastor John Owen put it, “Be killing sin, or sin will be killing you.” And coming to this battle armed requires skill with the arms and weapons of war. To fight the good fight as we ought, we must be involved in training, in spiritual disciplines designed to prepare us for spiritual battle against the domain of darkness.

This is why Paul says firstly that putting on the armor of life means “walking properly, as in the Day.” There are ways to live that reflect the approaching dawn, armor which reflects the Light of the world, and to put on this armor means that we pursue the ways of life which reflect not the night with its slumber and dreams, but the Day with the light and joy that it brings.

The proper way of walking ties in with what Paul discusses earlier about the “debt to love one another.” The problem with debts in all their many forms is that they tie Christians to focus on the structures, paradigms, and frameworks of a world that is passing away, of the night and the dream state that the world around us live in. Instead, the Christian ought to be freed from all-consuming obligations to the present age in order to be free to love in the radical, open, excessive way that reflects the power and majesty of the Kingdom of the Age to Come.

Love, of course, in its true form does not spring naturally into a person’s life full-grown. It has to mature in order to grow. Young lovers may think that they are “in love,” and they may in fact love each other to some degree, but the greatness of the maturity of the love of lovers after sixty years is no comparison to that first love of sixty days. In the same way, our ongoing debt to love our neighbor is the opportunity to learn the discipline of love in the Christian life, to mature and deepen in a love lived out of the love that God had for and indeed gave to us.

And so it is only by walking in love, by putting on the very love of God, that we are able to “walk properly, as in the Day.” But this is why Paul goes even further, even beyond “walking properly.” Paul says, in no uncertain terms, “Put on the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Beloved, we are not called to “put on” a mere way of life, a code of ethics, a call to arms. At bottom, just as we are called to “put off” a person, namely “self,” so we are called to “put on” a person, namely Jesus Christ, my Lord and yours. At the heart it really is all about putting on the one who gave his life for us and who is coming again for us. It is about being in a relationship of faith, love, and hope in him, and being found in him who is our only Savior, our only Lord, and our only hope or confidence for the present or the future.

But concretely, what does it mean to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ”? First, it means that when we put on Christ we become clothed in his armor, in his righteousness before his Father. Because we are clothed in his works, in “the sprinkled blood which speaks a better word than that of Abel” (Hebrews 12:24), we are spotless before Almighty God despite our sins, because of his death for us and his Resurrection from the dead.

Second, it means that the power of his life is the power of our life: the armor that he wore and with which he has wrought our salvation has become our armor. It is the armor of the light of daybreak! He is at once our Victor and our Example, and he not only gives up his life for us to imitate but he bequeaths the power which raised him from the dead and seated him at the right hand of the Father is at work within us to conform us completely into the image of Christ.

But third, it means that Christ’s protection surrounds us, and that no matter how hard we may swoon, or fall, or be wounded in this life, that the effect of Christ’s work that he accomplished on our behalf will not be in vain, and that he will raise us up on the last Day over all our foes: Sin, Satan, and Death itself.

“Putting on the Lord Jesus Christ” really lies at the heart of what Paul is getting at in this passage, yet it is precisely where as Americans we so often fall short in the Christian life. I was recently at a fantastic conference where Francis Chan, a pastor from Los Angeles, was one of the speakers. He pointed out something in his talk that I had been intuiting and feeling, but had never put into words. He gave it words perfectly. As Christians in America, he remarked, we often play the “Christian liberty” card a lot when confronted with the decisions that we have to make. So, the Bible does not forbid me from having _____ or doing _____, so it should be okay for us to have or do, right? So we indulge and allow it. And because in all these little details, not problematic or forbidden in-and-of themselves, we live comfortably like normal people in society except that we go to church on Sunday. The problem becomes that, over the decades as you look back at the aggregate picture and the story of our lives, *it looks nothing like Jesus*. Bit-by-bit we have sold the farm, conformed to the world rather than to Christ, and have in the process failed to “put on” the Lord Jesus.

Beloved, the Day is at hand. Christ calls, compels you to live now lives that reflect the reality that is just over the horizon, to live holy and righteous lives before him because the New Creation is at hand. We may reflect his rays with the armor of light dimly now, but when he comes “he will transform our lowly bodies to be like his glorious body by the power by which he is able to subject all things to himself” (Philippians 3:21)

4. Conclusion.

“Wake up!” “The night is far gone, the Day is at hand!” Before we see the sun, this can be hard to wrap our minds around, let alone our hearts. It may seem too good to be true, too far out of our normal, regular, nightly experience. But the important thing is this: to stay awake.

This is because, brothers and sisters, our Lord Jesus is coming quickly and suddenly, like a thief in the night. It will be like in the days of Noah: everyone was going about their business when suddenly the deeps and the heavens opened up and poured forth water, and they were overwhelmed by the Flood of God’s coming.

And so it is that no one knows the day or the hour of Christ’s appearing. But he is coming, he comes quickly, and his reward is with him. So the question remains: are you asleep or are awake? Have you adapted to and adopted the regular, average, ordinary, normal way of viewing and living life in this world, like the rest in the dream state, without a thought to the coming Dawn and Day? Or have you instead rejected the world’s way of life and thinking, its dreams and ambitions and hopes, and instead staked your life and fortune and hope for the future only on the glorious coming of our Lord Jesus?

I pray today, beloved, that you will know the time, that the hour has now come for you to be raised from your sleep. I pray that you may grasp the truth that salvation is nearer to us than when we believed, that the night is indeed far gone, and that the day is at hand. And I pray that you will put on the Lord Jesus Christ, to whom with the Father and the Holy Spirit be glory, honor, praise, and majesty both in this present Age, and in the Age to Come. Amen.

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