

Putting Aside the Deeds of Darkness

Romans 13:11-14 on February 25, 2024

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Please read Romans 13:11-14 before going further in this transcript.

Romans 13:11 begins, “And do this, understanding the present time: ...” By “this” Paul is referring back to everything from chapters 12 and 13.”¹ For those of us here at E-Free Bemidji, that means he’s pointing back to everything that we’ve been learning about since January 7th. Over these past 2 months, we’ve learned about...

...Worshipping God with our lives (12:1-2) by offering our bodies as a living sacrifice holy and pleasing to God, which is our true and proper worship.

...Worshipping God with our spiritual gifts (12:3-8) as one body with many parts, each one of us doing our part to serve.

...The distinguishing marks of a disciple of Christ (12:9-16), which include a whole variety of godly attributes and actions.

...Overcoming evil with good (12:17-21), and not repaying anyone evil for evil, but rather trusting God to ultimately set all things right.

...Subjecting ourselves to the governing authorities (13:1-7), whom God has put in place as His servants, for our good.

...Loving our neighbors as ourselves (13:8-10), which fulfills God’s law, and continues to pay toward our outstanding debt to love our fellow humans.

Paul wants us to do this, all of this, in light of our understanding of the present time. So whatever he means by “the present time,” it’s awfully important, because it motivates us toward the Christian living that he’s been talking about in these last two chapters. “The present time” isn’t referring to the specific time when Paul was writing this letter, ~AD 57. What Paul’s driving at here is the present time within God’s salvation history. Paul wants us to understand the sobering reality, that we’re living in the final chapter of history before Christ’s return.^{2 3}

Understanding the present time motivates believers to...

1) Wake up and put on the armor of light! Romans 13:11-12 says, “And do this, understanding the present time: The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here....” When Paul says, “wake up from your slumber,” he’s confronting the spiritual and moral laziness within the Roman Church! He’s calling out

¹ NIV Zondervan Study Bible, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2317 footnote on Romans 13:11.

² See NIV Study Bible, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1912 footnote on Romans 13:11.

³ Consider 2 Peter 3:3-18.

anyone who considers themselves a deeply devoted follower of Jesus, but who's grown apathetic to the gospel message, and become indifferent to the Great Commission mandate. The motivation for waking up in verse 11 is that "our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed." This salvation, which is nearer now, isn't referring simply to our initial salvation from sin, but rather to our final salvation. Our salvation which will be fully completed, when Jesus returns for His followers, and when He rewards those who've been faithful to Him.⁴ God the Father has set a particular time for Christ's return, and Paul is reminding all of us that that particular time is drawing nearer every day. In verse 12, "the night" stands for this present evil age, which is nearly over; it's about to come to its final end. And "the day" is referring to the wonderful Day of our Lord's return, which is almost here.⁵ So Paul is reminding the believers that this present-day world is not our final home. We're now approaching the far right-end of the timeline, so there is less and less time remaining. Therefore, it's vital that we "understand the present time."⁶

With what time remains, we must live, in light of this reality, and if we've fallen asleep spiritually, then we need to WAKE UP and put on our spiritual armor. Romans 13:12 goes on, "The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light." This call to put on armor, indicates a battle cry, it's a call to Christian action. We need to wake up and do these things we've been talking about...

...stop conforming to the patterns of this world. (12:1-2)

...serve faithfully with our spiritual gifts. (12:3-8)

...embrace godly attitudes and actions. (12:9-16)

...overcome evil with good. (12:17-21)

...be subject to our governing authorities. (13:1-7)

...love our neighbors as ourselves. (13:8-10)

Understanding the present time, we need to live out the powerful potential of our Christian lives.⁷

As the Apostle Paul continues writing this letter to the believers at the church in Rome, he now moves to the topic of personal holiness: among other things, those of us who are becoming deeply devoted followers of Jesus together need to wake up and stop sinning!

⁴ See Romans 8:23 and Hebrews 9:28.

⁵ "These texts do not mean that the early Christians believed that Jesus would return within a few years (*and thus were mistaken*). Rather, they regarded the death and resurrection of Christ as the crucial events of history that began the last days. Since the next great event in God's redemptive plan is the second coming of Jesus Christ, 'the night,' no matter how long it may chronologically last, is 'nearly over.'" *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1913 footnote on Romans 13:12.

⁶ "The night is nearly over..." i.e. "The time of evil is nearly over, and the day of the Lord is imminent." Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans, 2nd Ed.*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2018, p. 677.

⁷ Ephesians 6 comes to mind, "Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God, SO THAT you can take your stand against the devil's schemes." (Ephesians 6:10-11)

Understanding the present time motivates believers to...

2) Put aside the deeds of darkness and behave decently.

Romans 13:12-13 goes on, "...So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. 13 Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy." To be clear, when Paul says, "let US put aside the deeds of darkness," he's addressing his fellow Christ-followers. Paul illustrates this with yet another aspect of night and day. This time he speaks of dark and light; with darkness being not so much a marker of *time*, but rather a marker of *sin*. Bible scholar Douglas Moo explains it this way: "The ancient world, without electricity to keep cities lit at night, viewed darkness as the time of evil and corruption. Criminals could carry out their deeds under cover of night and escape detection. ...So it was natural for people to associate evil with the nighttime. Hence, Paul can call on us to put aside the 'deeds of darkness' and to behave 'decently, as in the daytime.' Believers are to have nothing to do with those activities conducted in the dark – wild parties, excessive drinking, and sexual misbehavior."^{8 9}

Now, I don't know about you, but I find Paul's bluntness here a bit jolting in verse 13. I mean, is there really that much of a problem with these kinds of sins in the church? Carousing and drunkenness? Sexual immorality and debauchery? Dissension and Jealousy?^{10 11} Well... apparently there was a problem with the Christians in Rome, at least enough of a concern for Paul to state it explicitly. The fact is, Paul needed to address the existence of blatant sin, in just about every church that he wrote to. So let's not be naïve about sin in our own local church, and let's not put on an arrogant façade of "holier than thou," as though sins like these would never happen at E-Free Bemidji. Instead, let's take sin seriously, and let's address it honestly. Let's be mindful of it, confess it, and repent of it. Psalm 32:3-5 says, "When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For

⁸ Douglas J. Moo, *Encountering the Book of Romans, 2nd Ed.*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2014, pp. 174-175.

⁹ It's worth pondering the fact that, in the new heaven and earth, there will be no sun. Our coming reward will include a radically different existence. Revelation 21:22-27 gives us a partial description of it: "I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it. Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life."

¹⁰ We've seen a similar list of these kinds of sinful vices before in Paul's letter. Way back in Romans 1:28-30 Paul declared, "Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done. They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents." But here's the thing, those of us who are following Jesus, DO think it's worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God. We have trusted Christ for our salvation, and we've been declared righteous. Jesus has imputed His righteousness to us. SO, what in heaven's name are we doing in Romans 13 putting on the deeds of darkness? Why are we behaving indecently and thinking about how to gratify the desires of our sinful flesh?

¹¹ We have here three sets of sinful indecency: drunken parties, sexual misbehavior, and jealous dissension. It's worth noting that these particular sins are often listed together, see 2 Corinthians 12:20-21 and Galatians 5:19-21. Once we allow sin to run its course, it will include a myriad of despicable and regrettable behavior, behavior that's not only immoral but also destructive to Christian community. Paul will pick up on this idea of "dissension" and pursue this topic for the next 2 chapters in Romans 14-15. We'll be learning a lot more about bearing with one another in love. The immediate context of Romans 13:13 makes it clear that dissension within the church family is INDECENT behavior. James 5:8-9 warns against grumbling against one another, "You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near. Don't grumble against one another, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!" Unfortunately, I must admit that I had to repent of this myself just this past week. :(

day and night your hand was heavy on me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD." And you forgave the guilt of my sin." Rather than pretending that these kinds of sins could never happen to any of us, let's take God's Word to heart, by putting aside the deeds of darkness. And let's apply this sobering admonition to behave decently, by resisting these kinds of sinful behaviors, which are unfit for followers of Jesus.

Sinful behaviors in the life of a Christian are exactly opposite of the distinctive marks of a Christ-follower. So if you're not yet a follower of Jesus, but you've been watching someone who claims to be a follower, and that person is actively sinning w/o any remorse, then you need to know that this is most certainly not how following Christ is supposed to be. God desires holiness for His people, and He empowers and equips us to live out that holiness. His Spirit enables Christ-followers to live radically different lives. So, the Christian person you're watching, who is living in these sinful ways, either needs to genuinely repent of these sins, or they need to honestly admit that they don't really want to follow Jesus after all.

The season of lent is intended to be a time of grieving over our sin, and honestly confessing our need for forgiveness. And since none of us will ever live out our faith perfectly, it's a good thing that we have a Lord and Savior who understands our ongoing struggle against sin. The fact is, Jesus is continually advocating for us before our Heavenly Father. 1 John 2:1 reminds us, "My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One." One of the spiritual disciplines, which is sometimes highlighted during the season of lent, is the often-under-utilized practice of fasting. Fasting, in combination with repentance and mourning over our sin, can be a very effective weapon in our fight against sin. Fasting can actually increase our hunger for God and help us to focus in, on our need for Him.¹² So perhaps some of us reading this sermon today would benefit spiritually, by taking some time to fast from food, or media, or whatever else might help us to draw near to the Lord. Fasting can be an incredibly helpful way for us to humble ourselves before God, and to plead with Him, for the victory over sin that we so desperately desire.

We find some other strategies for pursuing personal holiness in our final verse...

¹² I highly recommend John Piper's challenging book, *A Hunger for God*. <https://www.desiringgod.org/books/a-hunger-for-god>

Understanding the present time motivates believers to...

3) Pursue personal holiness by clothing ourselves with Christ and thinking rightly.

Romans 13:14 is a call to holy living: “Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh.” Verse 14 gives us two particularly effective strategies for personal holiness: our clothing and our thinking. First of all, our clothing. Obviously, verse 14 isn’t talking about literal clothing, so we’re not suggesting that a proper dress code is the key to avoiding sinful behavior. “Clothing ourselves with Christ” is a metaphor for putting on His righteousness, and remembering what he’s done to purchase our victory over sin.¹³ This kind of clothing stands in direct contrast to putting on the deeds of darkness, and gratifying the desires of our flesh. “The flesh” is our sin nature, our old self that keeps fighting for control within us, even though God’s Spirit now lives within us. Our flesh wants to take the reins again, or at least get us to submit to its wishes by gratifying its desires. Paul warns us “Don’t even think about it!” If you give your sinful flesh an inch, it’ll take a mile.

Pastor Timothy Keller points out that the clothes that we’re wearing usually have an effect on how we behave.¹⁴ If we put on formal clothes, like a suit and tie, or a long gown and heels, then we’re probably planning to go out for a nice dinner, and maybe even a special play or performance. If we put on running shoes and exercise clothing, then we’re probably planning to head to the gym, or to go for a jog. With this in mind, we also wear metaphorical clothing, and that clothing has an effect on how we behave. Before a Christian jumps into their sinful behavior, the first thing that they do is take off Christ, so that they can then put on their other clothes: their “carousing and drunkenness clothes,” or their “sexual immorality and debauchery clothes.” Changing our metaphorical clothing is something that happens in our hearts and minds. We wear this metaphorical clothing into sinful *places*, and we wear it when we’re around sinful *people*, who we know will invite us to join them in indecent behavior.

I appreciate how the *ESV* translates Romans 13:14, “But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.” This includes making no provisions to be in sinful *places*. Proverbs 7:7-9 says, “...I noticed among the young men, a youth who had no sense. He was going down the street near her corner, walking along in the direction of her house at twilight, as the day was fading, as the dark of night set in.”¹⁵ Rather than putting on Christ, we sometimes put on our clothes for going to sinful places. Rather than putting aside the deeds of darkness, we run

¹³ Our 10:45 song leader, Jason Robeck, wrote a great song about this called, “Garment.”

¹⁴ See Timothy Keller, *Romans 8-16 For You*, Good Book Co., India, 2015, p. 142

¹⁵ Read the whole chapter to get Proverbs 7’s full context.

straight toward them. These are places designed for sinful behavior, whether they're places in the real world, or places in our online world.

Pursuing personal holiness also includes making no provisions to be with sinful *people*, who will tempt us toward unholy behavior. 1 Corinthians 15:33-34 says it this way, “Do not be misled: “Bad company corrupts good character.” 34 Come back to your senses as you ought, and stop sinning; for there are some who are ignorant of God—I say this to your shame.” Back in my days as a Youth Pastor, I used to ask our students, “Are your friends influencing you, or are you influencing them?” I’ll ask us adults a similar question, “who is influencing who?” “Is this world influencing you toward sin, or are you influencing this world toward Christ?” So we’re not saying that we can only have Christian friends, but we are saying that if our non-Christian friends are dragging us into sin, then we need to come to our senses, and stop sinning.

If we truly desire personal holiness, then we need to clothe ourselves with Christ, and remain clothed with Christ. Not only is this an effective strategy for avoiding fleshly desires, but it’s also an effective strategy for maintaining a godly influence with our lost friends and family. We clothe ourselves with Christ, because we know that it’s only through HIM, and His righteousness, that we have any possibility of experiencing personal holiness.

A second particularly effective strategy for our personal holiness is our thinking. Romans 8:5-6 reminds us, “Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The MIND governed by the flesh is death, but the MIND governed by the Spirit is life and peace.” Personal holiness is a mindset, and not just a mindset, but an intentional setting of our minds. It involves a conscious effort, to not even think about gratifying these sinful desires, which is another way of making absolutely no provision for our flesh.¹⁶ Romans 13:14 says, “...and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh.” This battle against sin, is a battle that’s waged with our thinking. The admonition in Romans 13:14 echoes the call to renew our minds back in Romans 12:2, “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.”¹⁷ So rather than thinking of ways to gratify our sinful desires, we should instead be thinking of ways to live for Christ. Rather than making provisions for the flesh, we need to be making provisions for godly living.

¹⁶ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans, 2nd Ed.*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 2018, p. 681.

¹⁷ Ephesians 4:22-24 reminds us, “You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.”

The world that we live in, is constantly barraging us with temptations to sin. It's persistently inviting us to join in on the fun, and by "fun" it means the reckless and wild living of blatant rebellion against God.¹⁸ So it's vital for Christ-followers, who are living in the midst of the patterns of this world, to renew our way of thinking, so that it's aligned with God's good, pleasing, and perfect will.¹⁹ We need to renew our minds with things like fasting, and time in Scripture and prayer, and consistent Christian fellowship, and so on. These kinds of strategies for holiness, will transform us into the holy people that God intends us to be.

For a good number of us, the things that we've been talking about this morning probably aren't all that new. If we've been following Jesus for a good number of years, then today's message may feel a bit like "Christianity 101." And yet, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Paul felt compelled to include this reminder in his letter to the Roman church. And I'm guessing that all of us, including myself, may need this reminder about personal holiness more than we realize. The fact is, one of the reasons that so many of us get off track with our devotion to Jesus, is that we don't consistently embrace these fundamental strategies, the way that we should. It's all too easy for us, after so many years of following Jesus, to get lazy, or overconfident, or distracted in our faith. We begin to let our personal holiness slide, and we fall into a deep, spiritual slumber. If that describes any of us here today, then we need to WAKE UP! Romans 13 has made it quite clear this morning, "understanding the present time," we need to do these things!

Colossians 3:1-10 summarizes it this way,
"Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator."

¹⁸ See 1 Peter 4:4.

¹⁹ Consider Romans 1:28 and see *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2315 footnote on Romans 12:2.