

“Dawn or Dusk” (fn.:ROMANS 13 11-14.2019.DOC)

Scripture: Romans 13:11-14

William C. Pender

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, 12/1/19

Romans 13:11-14: ¹¹ Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; ¹² the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; ¹³ let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. ¹⁴ Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

In a nitty-gritty portion of the Apostle Paul’s letter to the Romans, Paul moves through some very practical details about “common sense” living—pay your bills; comply with authorities; tell the truth; don’t cheat; don’t be a “party animal.” There are many “don’t”s as well as a few “do”s—do show love for everyone. And Paul was not caught up in any sentimentality about love—that somehow love was doing what feels good to you. No, says Paul, love is about what feels good for your neighbor.

Here’s how C.S. Lewis summarized this command to love our neighbor:

Do not waste your time bothering whether you “love” your neighbor, act as if you did. As soon as we do this, we find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone, you will presently come to love him. If you injure someone you dislike, you will find yourself disliking him more. If you do him a good turn, you will find yourself disliking him less.¹

In the midst of these basic details about life, Paul raises a deeper concern. He says to his readers: “You know what time it is.” One of the basic definitions of our humanity is our knowledge of time—holding on to time may seem like trying to cup water in our hands, as we know how time slips away from us. There is that wonderful expression of wisdom in Ecclesiastes 3: To everything there is a season and time for every matter under heaven. And what follows is a naming of the times— a time to be born and a time to die; a time to lose and a time to win; a time for love and a time for hate; and so on.

Paul says to his readers: “You know what time it is.” Well...what was their time—the time of Paul’s readers? Paul’s readers lived in a time of darkness—government leadership was questionable; businesses failed; natural disasters were evident; wars continued to spring up; and mortality was all around—children died early and often; average age-spans were 40 years; no one was safe. People lived in darkness.

How about today? How often I hear the same expression of darkness, particularly from people of retirement age and older! I hear these complaints: The world is falling apart. Things are getting worse and worse. And, course, “things are NOT like the good old days.” Just this past week, my barber asked me: “Preacher, don’t you think that Jesus is coming soon? Because things are getting so bad...so terrible...so dark.”

The Apostle Paul says to his readers and to us: “You know what time it is.” And here is Paul’s reading of the “times:” Yes, the times are dark, but it is the dawn rather than the dusk that is ahead. Paul would readily agree with that old saying that “it is always darkest before the dawning.” Paul says: “The night is far gone, the day is near.” And he continues by noting what we wear in darkness is different from what we wear in the daylight.

Nighttime and daytime clothing—what we put on is different. Sometimes, in pastoral confidence, I find out about the attire of church members in darkness. I learn what members wear to bed—maybe more

¹ Quote can be found in many places, here’s one: https://www.cslewisinstitute.org/webfm_send/85 as of 12/1/19.

confidential than knowing their pledge! Some of you have a favorite set of pajamas; some of you have some ragged socks you wear; some of you sleep in gym shorts and a tee shirt; and some of you sleep *au natural*. And no...I will not have you raise your hands to identify which category you are in!

No matter our dress for darkness, it is not the same for light. We dress differently for the light. Indeed, we act differently in the light. And here is the Apostle Paul's most radical guidance... we are to live in the darkness "as if" it were light already.

Perhaps you know that routine of a morning shower to mark the transition from nighttime to daytime. The Methodist pastor Adam Hamilton (whose books we have used in Sunday School and in Wednesday night studies) noted how many of us move from darkness into light by taking a morning shower. So he had waterproof tags made up—he called them "shower tags." On the tags was printed the following: "Lord, as I enter the water to bathe, I remember my baptism. Wash me by your grace. Fill me with your Spirit. Renew my soul. I pray that I might live as your child today, and honor you in all that I do." His congregants were invited to take one of these water-proof tags and hang them over their shower nozzles at home—the words of the prayer to be there daily as a reminder of the transition from darkness to light. The waters of the shower are connected to the waters of baptism.

And, of course, it matters what we put off, cast aside. Early in the chapter, Paul named a lot of things to put off—basically all the "nots" of the Ten Commandments. Not to lie, not to steal, not to covet, not to break vows of relationship in marriage, and so on. These are the "not"s—what we are to put off ourselves. But Paul also addresses what we put on: Put on the armor of light...put on the Lord Jesus Christ. And what we put on shapes us.

What we put on shapes us. As we are coming up on Christmas and all the versions of doing a Christmas pageant with children, one of our fondest family memories is of our four year-old son being an angel in the Christmas pageant—and he was far from being angelic. But there he was in the pageant—in his white robe, the tinsel halo, and the wings. He took his role as seriously and sincerely as any four-year old could, but during the pageant, he began climbing up on the stage platform and then jumping off, landing on the floor below. He repeated this throughout the pageant. When asked after the pageant what he was doing, he said: "I have wings. I want to fly!" He had put on wings and what are wings for? For flying! What we put on, we live into!

Paul's counsel to his readers continues to apply to us today. Yes, it is dark. But we live NOT at the beginning of darkness but at the end of darkness...looking for the dawn. Maybe we are at times when Jesus needs to come, as my barber was saying. Maybe this is the generation to see that. Or maybe we will meet Jesus the same way that generations before us have done—one by one, as we close our eyes for the last time...even as my father did just over two weeks ago. But every morning that we do wake up, we decide what to put on...to put on even in the darkness...to put on what is best for the light.

What we put on matters...because we know the time...that we are closer to the light than we were before. Given that "what we put on matters"—I think that yields some understanding of the popularity of tattoos. I am still sitting on the "sidelines" on this one. I identify with the college student who explained his decision not to get a tattoo in this way: "Would you put a bumper sticker on a Ferrari?" In other words, the wonder of the human body is enough. However, I have found that a great conversation-starter with someone with a tattoo is simply to ask: "Tell me about your tattoos." And what I see then is a window into the soul, into the life, into the vitality of another person. The tattoo is expression of their life.

I get that. Indeed, I prefer a less permanent and less painful way to do this expression. One of the reasons that I wear a clerical collar for worship (besides the fact that I don't have to worry about what goes with black or grey—I am a bit color-challenged!)...one of the reasons that I wear this collar is to be reminded of

my role, my responsibility, my purpose. The clerical collar goes back to days of slavery. The collar around the neck indicated you were a slave, not a free person, and certainly not a “master.” The clerical collar is the symbol of servanthood. My job...my purpose...my focus is to serve...so I wear the collar.

What we put on matters because we know the “time.” Back in colonial America, there was a New England colonial legislature meeting. During the meeting, a solar eclipse took place. The daylight darkened. Fear was rampant. Since they had no scientists to tell them that this was a natural occurrence, a panic ensued. The legislature was in an uproar and there was a groundswell of rumbling for adjourning the meeting. Most were convinced that this was the end of the world.

One legislator rose to his feet and cried out, “Mr. Speaker,” addressing the moderator of the session. “Mr. Speaker, if this is not the end of the world, then our adjournment will be seen as foolish and laughable. If this is the end of the world, then I would like to be found doing my responsibility. I move, sir, that candles be brought and lit, and let us continue with our task.”

In other words, live “as if” it were daylight...even in the darkness.

Paul says: You know what time it is. Dress that way...live that way. The night is far gone and the day near. Put on the Lord Jesus Christ.