



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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The Day is at Hand

Romans 13:8-14

Fr. William Klock

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We'll be looking at Romans 13:8-14 this morning, but before we look at what St. Paul has to say there, let's think back—way back—in the biblical story. Think first back to Abraham. What was God's purpose for Abraham? When God called him, he made Abraham the father of new people. And, God said on numerous times to Abraham, it was through this people that his name and his blessings would be made known to the world. Abraham's life of faith—and then Israel's life of faith—was supposed to point the world to the Creator it had turned away from and forgotten. Israel's life of faith was meant to witness the sovereign faithfulness, the grace, and the lovingkindness of God.

Later, when God delivered Israel from Egypt, he gave the people his law. The law wasn't just a collection of arbitrary rules. The law was meant to teach God's people what love looks like. Think of the ten commandments we read a few minutes ago. The first half of those commandments teach us what love of God looks like; the second half teaches us what love of neighbour looks like. Jesus reiterated this point, summing up the whole law in the double commandment: love God and love your neighbour as yourself. Of course, the problem was that the people of Israel had the same fallen, sinful, idolatrous hearts as everyone else in the world. And that's why God promised through the prophets that a day would come when God would renew his covenant with his people by baptising them with his own Spirit, taking their hearts of stone and pouring into them his Spirit, pouring into them godly love. This is what Jesus did and this has been what

Paul has spent so much time pointing to in the first half of Romans, especially with all his talk of Abraham's children according to the flesh and Abraham's children according to the Spirit and when he wrote about those who are in Christ by faith are the true Jews or the true Israel. In Jesus, God has renewed and fulfilled his covenant with Abraham and finally created the Spirit-filled and Spirit-renewed people he had promised all along. Through us—through Jesus' people—the faithfulness, the grace, the lovingkindness of God are made known to the world—or, at least, they should be! We proclaim the good news that in the crucified and risen Lord Jesus God has fulfilled his promises and brought salvation, but we also proclaim his faithfulness and his salvation by *living* as the people Jesus has renewed and restored to God and filled with the Spirit. That's what Chapters 12 and 13 have been about. As Jesus gave himself as a sacrifice to bring God's salvation to the world, we are now called to offer ourselves as living sacrifices for the sake of making that salvation known to the world. Central to that is love. Paul has explained how the love the Spirit has poured into our hearts should be visible amongst believers in the Church. Unbelievers, when they look at us, should be amazed at the love Christians show for each other. Then Paul explained how that same love should engage the unbelieving world around us. We should be peaceable people who love even our enemies. What better way to show the world what God has done in Jesus for his own enemies than that we show that same kind of love our ours!

In 12:8 Paul now come back to this central theme of love. He writes:

Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.

“Owe no one anything.” I've heard this turned into a lot of sermons on how Christians should stay out of

financial debt. That's good advice and it squares with what the Bible teaches, but that's not really Paul's point here. Remember that the social structure of the entire ancient world was rooted in the idea of patronage and clientage. It's what made the world of the Greeks and Romans and even the Jews go round. You got ahead in the world by doing everything you could to put others in your debt or by being in debt to the right people. Jesus showed a very different way—a way of grace—as he deliberately sought out the outsiders and the people who had nothing to offer him. And that's got more to do with what Paul is now saying. Don't play that game of building social capital. Don't put yourself in a position where you owe things to people—and force others into a position where they owe you something. Follow Jesus and love people. Love people who have nothing to offer in return. Love people without expecting anything in return. Love your neighbour. Love your enemies! Just love people.

Why? Because “the one who loves another has fulfilled the law”. Remember, again, that the purpose of the law was to make Israel God's light to the world. Israel was unfaithful in that. But remember that Paul has said that we who are in Christ are justified by faith apart from works of the law. We've been given what Israel lacked. Jesus has poured God's Spirit into us, the Spirit has filled our hearts with love, and as it spills out from us to our neighbours the law is finally fulfilled. The love of God pouring out of us is the light God has always called his people to be.

Now, before we go any further, I think it's important to note that Paul isn't saying that this fulfilment of the law through love means that we've somehow earned God's favour or any kind of special status with him. That was never the point of the law in the first place and it isn't the point of the law today. The law has always been a way of responding to God's own love, mercy, and grace by reflecting back to

God his own loving character. Loving God and loving our neighbours is our central act of worship and gratitude in return for his love for us.

Some people may have questioned how this can be and so Paul writes in verses 9 and 10:

For the commandments, “You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,” and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.

This isn't rocket science. Paul is saying the same thing Jesus said and Jesus was saying the same thing many Jewish teachers had said before him: *Love fulfils the law*. You don't murder someone you love. You don't steal from someone you love. If you love someone, you'll be happy to see them prosper. You'll rejoice that your neighbour has a fine new house or car rather than being jealous that his house or car isn't yours. Love rejoices with those who rejoice and weeps with those who weep. Remember that? As an aside, it's interesting that back in Chapter 7, it was covetousness that revealed Israel's inability to keep the law apart from God's indwelling Spirit. Not murdering is usually easy. Not stealing is usually pretty easy too. But coveting? Coveting is something that happens in the heart. It's easy to justify. We haven't actually taken anything that belongs to our neighbour, after all. And covetousness is something we can easily hide from others. But the fact is that in coveting we *have* stolen something from our neighbour. Paul says that we owe everyone a debt of love and if we covet, we rob a person of the love for them that God has entrusted to us.

It should also go without saying, but Paul says it anyway: If you love your neighbour, you won't commit adultery

with his wife (or her husband). Plenty of people struggle with this one too—or, more accurately, they *don't* struggle with it when they should. The problem is that word “love”. Paul here is using the Greek word *agape* that refers to the sort of selfless and sacrificial love that God poured out for us at the cross. In English, however, “love” does duty for all sorts of things. As I said before, sometimes it's used for the opposite of love—as when someone talks about making love to a prostitute. Our word can refer to selfless and sacrificial behaviour, but it can also be used to refer to utterly selfish attitudes and behaviours that are destructive to others. I've heard more than one person—even some Christians—justify an affair or justify leaving his or her spouse to start up a relationship with someone else, saying, “Oh! But we love each other so much.” In biblical terms, that's not love. It's lust. Of course, you can't justify leaving your spouse for the sake of lust.

Brothers and Sisters, the love that Paul writes about here is love that models the love of Jesus, poured out for his enemies in his death on the cross. This is the love the prophets promised that God would pour into the hearts of his people to make them overflow with love for God and love for neighbour. The Spirit doesn't pour lust into our hearts. Lust is what wells up there when God's Spirit is absent. Love does no wrong. Love builds up; it doesn't tear down. If you ever find yourself wondering if an activity or a behaviour is really loving, ask yourself if it builds up others or if it breaks others down—not yourself, but others. There's the problem we so often have. Our selfish hearts too often think only of ourselves. I feel good when I'm having that affair. She feels good when we have that affair. It must be good. But we ignore the other relationships, the families that are destroyed in the process. *Love always seeks the good of the other*.

And the world will notice. Even when the world hates us for our love, it will notice. Sexual immorality was rampant in the Greco-Roman world just as it is today, and as much as people might have sneered at Christians and called them prudes, the testimonies we have tell us that Christians' refusal to engage in sexual immorality had a profound impact on the pagan world. They were light in the darkness, and that's what God's people have always been called to be.

Now speaking of light in the darkness, look at how Paul continues in verses 11 and 12:

Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.

As important as it is to be the people Jesus and the Spirit have made us in order to show God's love to the world through our lives, there's even more at stake. Paul gives us a picture of an army encampment. It's early morning. The sun is about to rise at any moment. And we see Paul walking through the camp. The battle is going to begin soon. Some of the men are awake, putting on their armour, and getting their weapons ready. But not everyone. We can see Paul opening more than one tent flap and throwing a bucket of cold water on a sleeping soldier. Paul uses this imagery in two other places. In 1 Thessalonians 5 he warns the Thessalonians that the *day* of the Lord will come unexpectedly. He likens it to a woman going into labour. Destruction will come, but he reminds them, they're already prepared. The world is rumbling along thinking things are peaceful and secure, but Christians should know better. They're sons of light and sons of the day. They've been called for just this purpose and so they need to put their

armour on. The day of God's wrath is coming. Put on the breastplate of faith and love and the helmet of hope. God has not destined them for destruction, but for salvation. Battle is coming, but they will endure, trusting in God by loving each other and remembering that Jesus died for us so that we may live with him.

In Ephesians 5 and 6 Paul says much the same thing: You have been predestined for adoption as sons of God. Paul tells the Ephesians to love as Jesus loved, giving themselves up willingly as an offering and sacrifice to God. They are to leave behind idolatry and immorality, leaving the darkness behind in order to walk in the light. But Paul also warns that the days are evil, but they have been sealed for redemption.

When Paul warns the Roman Christians that "salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed", when he says that "the night is far gone; the day is at hand", when he says to "put on the armour of light", he's saying that persecution is around the corner. Jesus warned that this would be the case. It was already happening on a small scale here and there. Paul had experienced it himself. In less than a decade many of the brothers and sisters in Rome, many of Paul's own friends, would be arrested under Nero's authority, charged with the "crime" of being Christians, and would suffer terrifying punishments and many would die for their faith in Jesus. Paul knew that in the present, it was easy for many to be complacent or for many to be distracted by pointless conflicts within the Churches or by worldliness, falling back into old ways and old sins.

No to face the coming day of battle, Jesus' people needed to set aside the way of the darkness and put on the armour of light. Here's what he says specifically in verses 13 and 14:

Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and

drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Paul starts out with a list of things that often do happen at night—shamefully things that even unrepentant sinners often do under the cover of darkness. Night-time is typically the time for wild parties where people get drunk and engage in all sorts of sexual immorality. Rome was known for the parties of the elite and even some of the emperors. People heard stories and rumours of the immoral things that took place at them. Few Christians would have taken part in those sorts of things and even fewer would have been invited to those sorts of parties, but Paul still reminds them anyway: this is not the way of love; this is not the way of Jesus; this is not the life of the Spirit. But then he moves on from night time sins to some sins that take place in broad daylight: quarrelling and jealousy. I've never heard of a drunken orgy happening in a church, but quarrelling and jealousy (unfortunately) happen all the time. And now we see why Paul wrote first about drunken orgies. Everyone knew drunk orgies were out, but now Paul puts quarrelling and jealousy on par with them. Brothers and Sisters, quarrelling and jealousy are just as wrong for Christians as drunken orgies. Again, based on the way people behave in many churches we might doubt this, but it's true. Quarrelling and jealousy are just as unloving as the activities that went on at one of Caligula's debauched parties. Think about that the next time you're tempted to be jealous of a brother or sisters, start a quarrel in the Church, or spread gossip.

No, Paul says, don't do these things. The battle is coming with the dawn and we need to be ready to face it. So put on the Lord Jesus Christ and don't

even think about gratifying your old sinful desires.

How do you overcome the flesh? Put on Jesus. He's the one, after all, who has redeemed you from death and clothed you with righteousness. He's the one who has plunged you into God's own Spirit in your baptism. Put on Jesus. He is our armour in the coming battle.

But *how* do we put on Jesus? Well, the fact is that we already have put him on. We were clothed with Jesus in our baptism. The real problem is that in the night we can become complacent. We live as if the battle weren't coming with the dawn. And we set Jesus aside. Maybe not entirely. Maybe we leave the boots on, but we take the breastplate off. Maybe we leave the breastplate on, but we take the helmet off. Brothers and Sisters, the day is coming. Put Jesus on. Begin each day with prayer. Meditate on the cross. Remember your baptism. And remind yourself that you have put on Christ. If you've loosened your grip on him or even let go to take hold of the things of the world, let everything else go and grab onto Jesus with both hands. And, just as important as prayer, read your Bible. We loosen our grip on Jesus because our trust in him falters. We loosen our grip on Jesus because we've forgotten the true depth of his love for us. So read your Bible. Read the promises of God to his people and see how he has made good on them over and over and over and, particularly, how he has fulfilled them at the cross. Read your Bible and meditate on the love of God for sinners like you, then meditate on the love of God and let his Spirit fill your own heart with that love. Brothers and Sisters, put on Christ and let your life become characterised by love of God and love of neighbour. You can't do it on your own. That was Israel's problem. Let Jesus do it in the power of the Spirit.

It's not easy. If it were, we wouldn't have to rely on Jesus. But we know it's possible. Paul knew that the battle was coming, but he also knew that God would vindicate his people. The first wave of persecution came from the Jews, but just as Jesus had said would happen, judgement came on Jerusalem. God used the Romans to judge the unfaithfulness of the Jews. The second wave of persecution came from the Roman empire. And Paul knew that, having judged his own people first, God would bring judgement on the Greeks and Romans as well. It didn't happen in Paul's lifetime, but it did happen. Eventually even mighty Caesar was on his knees before the Lord Jesus. Each time Jesus' people faced persecution, but God vindicated them in the end.

Brothers and Sisters, we once again live in a time when much of the world stands against Jesus and his people. It's hard to say what the future holds, but we know we live in a post-Christian era and the world's hostility to Jesus is only getting worse. Whether that means we will face persecution in our lifetime is hard to say, but it's not an unreasonable conclusion. It will come, sooner or later. The night is far gone, the day of battle is soon to come. How is the Church preparing? Are we quarrelling and jealous? Are we living selfishly? Or are we living the life of love that Jesus has given us through the Spirit? Are we fulfilling the law by wholeheartedly loving God and loving our neighbours—and even our enemies? Our problem today is that the prevailing philosophies think that love will “just happen” as long as people are sincere. But Jesus and Paul—all of Scripture—tells us otherwise. Love is something we have to work at as the Spirit does his work in us. The world says that this is “inauthentic” or ‘hypocritical’, but we need to realise that this only serves to highlight all the more the world's profound misunderstanding of true and godly love. It's easy to love when we

have first been loved, but that happens a very limited amount of the time. We need to remember that love is not emotion so much as it is action. Most of the time we will need to clench our fists and grit our teeth and love despite our emotions and trust that the emotions will follow. They always do. And the world has always been transformed by godly love as a result. So Put on Christ. Come to his Table this morning and remember the love that God poured out for his us, his enemies, at the cross. Think on that love as you take the bread and the wine. Then take that love with you as you go and show it to the world.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, we prayed in the Collect this morning that you would teach us to ask for the things that please you so that our prayers will be answered. Let love be one of those things you teach us. We know that it doesn't come naturally to us. Even as you've poured love into our hearts through your Holy Spirit, the ways of the world compete and push love out. And so we ask: teach us to love. Teach us the meaning of love. Keep your Son and his cross ever before our gaze that we might know and live true love. We ask through him. Amen.