

“What Time Is It?”
Romans 13:11-14
October 29, 2023

INTRODUCTION:

Have you ever experienced the disorientation of waking up and not knowing where you are or what time it is? Thankfully, such experiences are usually temporary, but imagine what it would be like if it became permanent. As distressing as that might be, there is a spiritual condition that is far worse, but one from which the Christian is delivered. It is what we might call an historical disorientation in which a person doesn't know the meaning of the past, and in which there is no hope for a good and meaningful future.

One of my favorite bands when I was a teenager and young adult was Chicago. Like many, I enjoyed their music but didn't pay much attention to the words. In reflecting back on some of the lyrics of their songs, I notice a strong note of despair. Listen to the despair in their hit song, “Does Anybody Really Know What Time It Is?”

As I was walking down the street one day a man came up to me and asked me what the time was that was on my watch. And I said, Does anybody really know what time it is? Does anybody really care? If so, I can't imagine why. We've all got time enough to cry.

It's an expression of the absurdist philosophy of Albert Camus. He was an atheist who taught that the world is essentially without meaning. Hence, it is absurd. One possible response to that is suicide, which Camus didn't recommend on the grounds that it amounted to giving in to the absurd. Instead, he said, we should rebel against the absurd. He found the “Myth of Sisyphus” to be the perfect expression of this. Sisyphus was a Greek legendary figure who was punished by the gods by being consigned to a task of rolling a boulder up a hill for eternity. As soon as he reached the top, the boulder would roll back down to the bottom, and he would start over again. Camus recommended rebelling against this absurdity simply by imagining oneself happy in the face of such absurdity.

Paul teaches us in these few brief verses that there is meaning in this world. Life is not absurd. He tells us what time it is right now in a way that helps us locate ourselves relative to the past and to the future. He does so with a metaphor we experience every 24 hours, the dawn of day after a long night. He says it like this. **“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”** (v. 11-12). Human existence is likened to a 24-hour cycle. Nighttime is what the Bible

calls this “present evil age” (Gal. 1:4). It is the age brought about by the descent of humanity into sin through the sin of Adam. Daytime is the age to come, when the kingdom of God will be fully realized. When Paul says, **“salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed,”** he is referring to the second coming of Jesus when the age to come will be fully realized. We are now between the present evil age and the age to come which in Paul’s metaphor is analogous to dawn. The kingdom of God has begun to be seen since the first coming of Jesus, just as the sun begins to be seen in the early hours of dawn.

We could illustrate this with the Venn diagram of two overlapping circles, one being this present evil age and the other the age to come. We currently live in the intersection between those two circles. It’s the “already-not yet” time when the kingdom of God is already here in some ways but not yet fully here in other ways. Knowing the time in which we live has implications for how we live, and that’s what Paul develops with three commands in the rest of this passage. But before looking at that, let’s consider for just a moment the emotional impact of knowing what time it is. We’ve probably all had that nighttime experience when fears and anxieties intensify. There’s something about that 3:00 a.m. moment that tends to make difficulties and challenges seem larger and more ominous. In contrast, there’s something about the dawn that brings fresh hope and promise. Fears that seemed large at 3:00 a.m. are not so frightening at 7:00 a.m. We live right now in that place where the best is yet to come. The future is filled with hope and promise, and there are behavioral implications of that. I note three commands Paul brings, each with a contrasting positive and a negative component. What time is it?

I. Time to Put on the Armor of Light

In keeping with the metaphor of night and day, Paul’s first imperative is to **“cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.”** In a world prior to nighttime illumination, daylight was a commodity not to be wasted. It was the time to get up, throw off the bed covers, and begin the work needing to be done that day. Since as God’s people we are living at the dawn of the new age Jesus inaugurates, we are to throw off the items associated with the night and live in the full light Jesus brings.

What are these works of darkness we are to cast off? They are clearly those acts which are typical of the evil realm Jesus is bringing to an end. If you want a list of them, Paul gives an extensive list in Galatians 5 where he details the “works of the flesh” (Gal. 5:19-21). They include various sexual sins, idolatry, and sins against healthy relationships, such as anger, strife, and divisions. They are called works of darkness because they are works done by those who don’t see reality. They don’t see the beauty of God. They think God is the problem rather than the solution. They think the best life is the life in which they get to do whatever they want to do instead of a life of trust and obedience.

When you're in the dark, you do things like stub your toe on the bedpost or walk into a wall. You don't intend to do those things, but without seeing what is there, such painful occurrences are unavoidable.

The contrast between darkness and light speaks to that most ancient of all battles, the battle between falsehood and truth. Satan is the ruler of the kingdom of darkness, and Jesus says of him that **“he is a liar and the father of lies”** (John 8:44). The present evil age was launched by lies, when Satan slandered the character of God, suggesting that the prohibition of eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was motivated by God's desire to bring harm to Adam and Eve. Then he explicitly lied when he said **“You will not surely die”** (Gen. 3:4). The fact that this is a battle is indicated by Paul's language when he tells us to put on the *armor* of light. We would expect him to maintain the parallel language of works in keeping with the phrase “works of darkness.” But where we would expect “works of light” he writes “armor of light.” Armor is worn by warriors, and we are to fight for truth.

What does this battle for truth look like that Paul urges upon us? There are at least two fronts to this battle. The first one is to live within the truth of reality. There is a tendency within us all to live in the reality we want rather than in the reality that is. The reality I might want is one in which I am always right in my conclusions, while the reality I have is one in which I am often wrong. So one aspect of putting on the armor of light is to let God's light shine on our hearts, resulting in honesty about our sin and brokenness. Jesus is a physician who came for sick people who know and acknowledge the disease of sin within, not for sick people who are busy covering up their sin.

The second front in the battle for truth is to fight for the truth of God's word. Ultimately, this armor of light that we are to put on is gospel truth. Putting this on usually does require a fight. We have to fight the lies inside our heads that tell us that we are like abandoned orphans that no one cares about. Do the ideas of that children's song often float around in your head? “Nobody likes me, everybody hates me. I think I'll go eat worms! Big fat juicy ones, Eensie weensy squeensy ones. See how they wiggle and squirm!” We have to fight to put on the truth every day that we are beloved sons and daughters of our great God. He is a God who can be trusted with our lives and a God who has secured for us a great future with him.

II. Time to Walk Properly

The second contrast describing what is appropriate for the time in which we live is a contrast between walking properly versus indecently. Whenever the Bible uses the metaphorical language of walking it is speaking about behavior. He names three sets of improper behaviors with two words for each one. The first couplet is “orgies and drunkenness.” “Orgies” here is not referring to sex

orgies but to orgies of drinking. Both of these words, then, are referring to excessive use of alcohol. The next couplet refers to sexual sin, using the words “sexual immorality and sensuality.” These first two couplets both describe sinful strategies employed to escape the pain of life in a fallen world. All four of these sins promise temporary relief from this pain, and they often do deliver what is promised. For a time, they allow us to escape the pain. You get drunk and everything looks good in life. That illicit sexual relationship makes you feel alive for a time in a way that is stimulating and exciting. The reality, though, is that the good feelings of these escapes, whether it’s the escape of alcohol or sex, turn out to be short-lived. The alcohol that delivers from pain turns out to enslave to a new and greater pain of addiction. The person pursuing you sexually turns out to be more like a predator seeking prey than a person who truly loves.

The third couplet describing ways we are not to walk addresses our relationships. We are not to walk **“in quarreling and jealousy.”** These are both part of the darkness of the present evil age. Quarreling is not the same as conflict. Healthy conflict is needed in every community, starting with the smallest community of a marriage. The quarreling that Paul speaks of here is the kind of dissension that comes from rivalries. I disagree with you not because of the merits of your case but because I’m on team red and you’re on team blue. It’s the kind of quarreling that refuses to find common ground with those with whom you disagree. This kind of quarreling divides people, resulting in increased isolation of people from one another.

Jealousy is also harmful to human relationships. It sees people as rivals against whom we are always comparing ourselves rather than seeing them as fellow image bearers we are called to love and serve. The unstated goal of jealousy is to conclude oneself superior to others.

III. Time to Put on the Lord Jesus Christ

The final contrast continues with this metaphor of putting on clothes. **“But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.”** This contrast gets to the heart of the challenge we face in living in the daylight of God’s glorious kingdom. This challenge is found in the word “flesh,” Paul’s word for the sinful nature. Notice the power assigned to the flesh. It has desires that are clamoring for fulfillment. In some ways, this sinful nature seems to be a separate person living inside us. It’s the Mr. Hyde part of Dr. Jekyll. Woody Allen spoke honestly about this in 1993 when he was explaining his affair with the teenage daughter of the actress Mia Farrow. “The heart wants what it wants,” said Allen. What it wanted in this case was clearly inappropriate. Yet Allen, I think, was speaking truthfully. There is a force inside of us, called the “flesh” or a “sinful nature,” that is beyond our ability to control. It is what Paul was referring to back in chapter 7 when he said, **“So I**

find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand”

(7:21). Do you know this inward battle of which Paul speaks? It’s one we all experience. You know the right thing to do, and part of you genuinely wants to do that right thing. But then there is another part of you that enters in and overcomes that better part. That is the sinful nature. It is what takes the pornographer back to his porn even after swearing off it. It is what takes the alcoholic back to the bottle even after repeatedly promising never to touch the stuff again. It is what leads to the angry outburst even after promising yourself that you will remain calm in that conversation you need to have with someone.

What hope is there for us in this battle against such a powerful foe? It is found in these simple words at the beginning of verse 14: **“But put on the Lord Jesus Christ.”** What is meant by these simple words? Notice first that Paul is using the language of clothing. We are to “put on” the Lord Jesus Christ like we put on our clothes in the morning. This language reaches all the way back to Genesis 3 when Adam and Eve attempted to deal with their shame by putting on clothes that would prove completely inadequate, clothing made of fig leaves. The clothing they needed was supplied by God at the end of the chapter when he clothed them in animal skins. That was an early foreshadowing of being clothed in the righteousness of Christ. Bloodshed was needed in both cases. So when we put on the Lord Jesus Christ, we embrace the power of God to forgive us, give us his righteousness, and make us his sons and daughters. Essentially, we embrace the gospel.

There’s something else these words mean. When we put on clothing, those clothes go with us wherever we go. We might say that they never abandon us. Deep within us all is a fear of abandonment, a fear of being all alone and without someone who is for us and with us. Wendy and I knew a man in our first church who confessed to us that his greatest fear in life was that he would die old and alone. By God’s grace, he came to faith during our time with him. As it turned out, he did die without ever getting married. He battled same sex desires, which kept him from getting married. But he didn’t die alone. He had put on the Lord Jesus, and God gave him a community of Christian brothers and sisters, including our family, who walked with him until his death.

CONCLUSION:

We are called here to remember what time it is. It is the time when the old world is fading. We are citizens of the new world, the kingdom of God that comes with King Jesus. Be filled with hope as we wait in confident assurance of the coming of this kingdom.