

The Coming King: The Day is Near
Sermon 12-23-18
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Romans 13:8-14

⁸Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. ⁹The 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, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” ¹⁰Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

¹¹Besides 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; ¹²the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; ¹³let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. ¹⁴Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Message:

When we read Romans 13:8-10, we might see this as pretty standard Christian rhetoric. It might just merely appear as if Paul is repeating what Jesus said about loving neighbor. If we look at it in isolation and out-of-context we miss the deeper meaning of these words of Paul though. You see, Romans is believed to be written in roughly 55-56 A.D. What colors Paul’s letter to Rome is events that took place long before this letter. According to biblical scholar N.T. Wright, “Although the details remain unclear, it is certain that a large proportion of Rome’s substantial Jewish population had to leave the city in the late 40s [A.D] following rioting that may have resulted from early Christian preaching among the Jewish community in Rome. The expulsion edict came from Emperor Claudius, after whose death in 54 the new emperor, Nero, rescinded his decrees, making it possible for the expelled Jews to return. This historical sequence produces a situation into which Romans fits like a glove.” So if you didn’t catch that, Jews were kicked out of Rome in the late 40s A.D. because of the ruckus they were creating in Rome. And that ruckus was likely made by Christian preaching. And then a little bit before the writing of this letter to Rome, the Jews were allowed to return to Rome by the goodwill of Emperor Nero. So imagine this with me. Jewish-Christians and gentile Christians create this ruckus in Rome. Jews who

didn't turn to Christianity and Jews who did convert to Christianity, both groups, get kicked out of Rome because they both identify as Jews. Who doesn't get kicked out of Rome? Gentile Christians. So imagine that you're a Jewish-Christian who had high social status in Rome. And social status was everything in Roman culture. Through money, war and politics, you gained social status. So imagine you get kicked out and for a number of years you have to live on the suburbs of Rome. Meanwhile, gentile Christians in Rome have the ear of the Emperor, they gain more converts and may have gained much influence in the absence of Jewish-Christians. Imagine that after the expulsion ends, that as a Jewish-Christian you expect that coming back into the city of Rome that you will be able to regain all that you attained prior to the expulsion: influence and leadership. Yet, you discover that in the absence of your presence, the void was filled by gentile-Christians. So imagine that gentile-Christians had already filled the synagogues as places of worship because it was vacated by Jews and Jewish-Christians. And to add further insult to injury, what if you weren't the one who created the ruckus, but were mistaken to have made the ruckus? What if gentile-Christians created the problem and Jewish-Christians and Jews were the ones who got wrongly blamed? If I were a Jewish-Christian coming back to Rome after expulsion, it would be hard for me not to resent gentile-Christians. Now, I don't know if that's exactly what happened, but I imagine something like that happened. How is it that gentile-Christians and Jewish-Christians are supposed to get along? And the passage before ours, Paul addresses what to do with Roman authorities. This passage is taken out-of-context all the time. But imagine if Jewish-Christians and gentile-Christians are upset by the oppression of the Roman authorities. What should they do? Certainly, one sect of the Jews would say to revolt. But Paul recognizes that that's not the mission for this group of Christians in Rome. So Paul isn't making a blanket statement on how to treat authorities in every situation per se, but he's telling the Rome Christians to focus on being Christ to those who do not know Christ. This is not the time for political revolution.

So as we come to our passage, I hope you see how this goes a little deeper than a random passage on loving neighbor. How does it start? ⁸"Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law." So gentile-Christians who stayed in Rome during the expulsion shouldn't feel like they owe Jewish-Christians anything. And Jewish-Christians shouldn't feel like they owe the Roman Empire for their return. Owing someone something can easily turn into something else: resentment. Have you ever owed someone? Or let's say, you owe money to the bank for a loan. Have you ever found yourself resenting owing others, or these institutions? I know, I sometimes resent owing money for my student loans. Verse 10, "Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law." When one chooses the way

of Christ to love one's neighbor no matter the things of the past, they fulfill the law. When Jewish-Christians can love gentile-Christians, they have fulfilled the law. When gentile-Christians can give-up social status in order to love Jewish-Christians, upon their return, they have fulfilled the law. When they can love each other as Jesus and Paul outline, despite the hardships of the past, this is a sign of the Kingdom of God. I hope you can see that love for each other is no flimsy affair. Think of the person that annoys you or you loathe the most. Imagine loving them. This is what we must do if we truly embody the love of Jesus. This is the fruits of our repentance.

In Paul's day, many believed that the return of Jesus, the second coming of Jesus, was imminent. That it was going to happen in their life time. So in Paul's writings he has this sense of urgency. 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; ¹²the night is far gone, the day is near.” In other words, Paul is saying, “Stop messing around.” Stop acting like the return of Christ is far away. See, if we're being honest, some of us are procrastinators in this audience. We're the ones who will consistently show up late to the appointment. We're the ones who will wait until April 15 to file our tax return. We're the ones who will wait until it's down to the wire to get that project done. Some of us like to wait until the last minute to do that Christmas shopping. You're probably sitting here today thinking, “I've still got plenty of time to shop.” Pssst...if you didn't know, Tuesday is Christmas. What Paul is talking about, though, it's not something you want to wait until the last minute. I remember years ago when I was in high school working at Footlocker as a sales rep. I can't remember how we got on the topic, but I told the client that I go to a private Christian school. And somehow we got talking about Jesus and how his mother wants him to believe in Jesus. He said, “I just figure when I'm on my death bed, that's when I'll believe in Jesus.” And I responded, “That's fine, but what if you don't get that chance? What if you die suddenly?” He responded, “Shoot. You're right.” And the conversation ended there. I don't know what happened to him or his faith, but I pray that he came to Jesus. Faith in Jesus Christ is not something you want to wait until the last minute, “...it is NOW the moment for you to wake from sleep.”

While our passage today is not about the birth of Jesus, it is about the second coming of Christ. What if, you knew, that on Tuesday that Christ was definitely coming again? How would your life change today if you knew He was coming again on Tuesday? This is the kind of thing Paul is speaking to in our passage. “For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; ¹²the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; ¹³let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and

drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. ¹⁴Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.” So, theologically speaking, when Paul says, “the night is far gone,” he’s saying, “Jesus has already conquered the darkness of this world.” “The day…” Paul refers to is the day of Christ’s return. Christ’s return is near. It’s not far away. It’s not off in the distance. It’s near. It could be happening on Tuesday. Even though Jesus has already conquered the darkness, we’re caught in this in-between point where there is darkness still present in this world. The temptation for you and I is to dabble in this darkness. To give into the faint dark power of this world. To sin. But if we believe in Jesus Christ, then the light of Christ is in each of us by way of the Holy Spirit. We have the power to fight this darkness. The victory is already won. We have our treasure in Christ. We have the Holy Spirit and all the tools we need to fight the darkness. Because some of us still fear the power of the darkness though, we hide in our faith. There’s no reason to hide though. We don’t fully tap into the power of the Holy Spirit. We don’t fully tap into the light of Christ. Paul tells us, “Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; ¹³let us live honorably as in the day…” If we are truly people of Jesus Christ. If we truly have Jesus Christ in our hearts, we have no need to wait on Christ’s return to clean up our lives. We have no need to wait to love our neighbors. We understand the power of Jesus Christ and we clean up our lives today as if it were the day of Christ’s return. Those who are faithful to Jesus don’t wait until the last minute to punch their ticket to heaven, they see the reward of salvation here and now. They see the reward of “the day” now. The treasure is already here in Jesus. It’s not in some dystopian or Pollyanna future. “The day” is NOW!! Those who live in the light of the day, do not dabble in “reveling and drunkenness, [they do] not [dabble] in debauchery and licentiousness, [they do] not [dabble] in quarreling and jealousy.” These are representative of darkness. ¹⁴“Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.”

In the waiting for the coming of this King, in the waiting of the second coming of Christ, if we truly believe in Jesus and have experienced His salvation, then we will live as people of the light. We will live as people who have already experienced the glory and majesty of the second coming of Christ. We will love our neighbors no matter the cost. We will give up the right to resent others for wrongs done to us. Despite what happens, Christian Jews and Gentiles will be one with each other as they are in Christ Jesus. We will extend mercy and grace. We will clean up our act long before Jesus’ returns. Not in a pretentious or “look at me” kind of way, but because we want to be ready and we want others to experience the magnificence of Christ’s coming among us. We want people to experience the joy and the hope of our savior. We want others to experience the

excitement of new and life-giving faith in Jesus Christ. We want people to experience the treasure and light of God coming among us in Christ Jesus. As John the Baptist says in Mark 1:15, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

In just a few minutes we’re about to sing a familiar song to many of us, “Joy to the World.” Before we sing it, reflect on it’s poetic words with me:

Joy to the world the Lord is come
Let earth receive her King
Let every heart prepare Him room
And Heaven and nature sing
Joy to the world the Savior reigns
Let men their songs employ
While fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains
Repeat the sounding joy
Repeat the sounding joy
Repeat repeat the sounding joy
No more let sins and sorrows grow
Nor thorns infest the ground
He comes to make His blessings flow
Far as the curse is found
Far as the curse is found
Far as, far as, the curse is found
He rules the world with truth and grace
And makes the nations prove
The glories of His righteousness
And wonders of His love
And wonders of His love
And wonders, wonders, of His love

The joy we will celebrate at the end of this season is not our final joy, but it is a powerful reminder that God cares about our physical and material lives and will fulfill everything that he has promised. The joy of the treasure, the light of Christ, is here and is coming. The day is near. It could come on Tuesday. Waiting in the cover of darkness is not the way of those who intimately know Christ. Those who know Christ and know of the wonders of his love, joy and salvation live as if the day is already here. Through Jesus, we are the light in the darkness. We know that Christ is already victorious. That Christ rules the world with truth and grace. As you wait for the coming of our King, live today like no other. Live today as if it’s your last. Live in the light of Jesus Christ today. Amen.