

4. The Night is Far Gone

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[0 : 00] Well, let us bow our heads and join our hearts together in prayer. And before I even utter one word of prayer, let's think how wonderful and marvelous it is that we can pray to a God who is unseen and yet very close, whose ear is open to our prayer as we come to him in the name of Jesus.

Dear God, our Father, it is wonderful and marvelous to us that the Lord Jesus should have been prepared to take our sins and sorrows and make them his very own, as the hymn puts it.

That he was prepared to bear the burden all the way to Calvary and suffered and died alone. Indeed, he was alone, dear Father.

Indeed, you had to turn your head away and he was forsaken by you for those brief but terrible hours. Because it was necessary that he should suffer for us.

Necessary that he should take the burden of our sin to the cross and pay the penalty, representing the human race, representing all of us. And how we thank you for this wonderful thing, this gospel, which we could never have devised, could never have thought it up ourselves, because we would always have thought that it depended upon us and our works and efforts.

[1 : 31] But it hasn't. And you, dear Father, had planned this good news, this wonderful series of events, the sending of your Son from eternity to eternity.

From before the creation of the world, you had it all planned that he should come and at the right time, just the right moment, should die for us in our helplessness and hopelessness.

So, dear Father, please accept our praises once again. And we do ask that you will help each one of us to become more and more of a truly, deeply thankful person.

That all of us might come to appreciate what you have done for us and should be deeply and often thankful to you and to the Lord Jesus for what you have done.

And we ask now that you will build us up, lift up our hearts and give us fresh courage by being here, by being in each other's company, and by listening to the Bible and the preaching.

[2 : 29] We pray that it will be an encouragement and a food, a meal, nourishment for all of us. And that you would build us up so that we can step forth, revived and blessed, and given fresh resolution to serve you with joy.

And we ask all these things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Well, friends, you'll see from our order of service that we're continuing with our little series of sermons.

This is the last one in this series from Romans 12 and 13. And I want to read just the final section of Romans 13 today. If you'd like to follow it in our visitors' Bibles, you'll find it on page 948.

So I'm reading Romans 13, verses 8 to 14. In the first half of Romans 13, which we looked at last week, we find Paul encouraging the Christians in Rome to be subject to the governing authorities.

In other words, to obey the government, to pay their taxes and so on. But now he moves on to something a little bit different. But there is a link, and I'll try to show what that is in a few minutes' time. So Romans 13, verse 8.

[3 : 44] Owe no one anything except to love each other. For the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. 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. 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. 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.

[4 : 58] Amen. Well, may God bless these words to us. If you'd like to turn back over the page to Romans 12, verses 1 and 2, I'll just try to set the scene so that we get the context right for the second half of chapter 13.

Paul begins this section, which really runs right the way through to the end of Romans. He begins it at chapter 12, verses 1 and 2, after his great exposition of the gospel in the first 11 chapters.

And you'll see where Paul begins. 12.1 I appeal to you, therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God. So what Paul is saying is, I've been unfolding to you the mercies of God.

God's great mercy. The gospel, he is saying, is a demonstration of God's love and mercy given to us. And he's saying, I appeal to you by these mercies. In light of these mercies, to respond in two ways.

In body and in mind. So he says in verse 1, as far as your bodies are concerned, present your bodies to God as a living sacrifice. So that your whole physical life, everything we do in the body, is lived out in a God-pleasing way.

[6 : 09] But also, verse 2, in your minds. By refusing to conform your thinking to the ways of this world. In other words, being non-conformists.

But rather, to have your thinking transformed by having your minds renewed. So that you begin to understand and live out God's will. Now those two verses, Romans 12, 1 and 2, have been described, I think well described, as the fountainhead of all Christian living.

Or the fountainhead of all Christian ethics. Because they describe something of the profound personal revolution that takes place when a person becomes a Christian. And then Paul, having explained those principles in verses 1 and 2, he then proceeds for the next few chapters to unpack them.

And to show his Christian readers what this transformed living and thinking, which follows real conversion, actually looks like in daily life. Now 99% of it is about the way we relate to other people.

Godly living, holiness, according to the New Testament, is all about the way we think about other people and the way we relate to them. The things that we do to them or for them and the things that we don't do to them.

[7 : 25] So godliness is relational. So Paul applies these principles of verses 1 and 2, first of all, to the way in which Christians relate to each other. In the church.

And he spells that out in verses 3 to 8. Then in chapter 12, verses 9 to 21, he opens it out to the way Christian people relate to others in the wider community.

Including the way we relate to those who persecute Christians. You'll see they're mentioned in verse 14 there. Then in chapter 13, 1 to 7, he teaches us how to relate to the government.

To Mr. Salmond and Mr. Cameron. And the multiplicity of laws and taxes which the government lays upon us in order to run the country.

So submit, says Paul. Pay your taxes. Pay everything that you owe. And chapter 13, verse 7, which we looked at last week, really acts as a bridge into the passage that we're looking at today.

[8 : 23] In this sense. Verse 7, you see, is about our obligations as Christians. Paul is saying we have a duty to pay our taxes and our revenues. So therefore, although at a very important level, Christian people are no longer of this world, part of this world.

Yet in a different sense, we're still in this world. And we need to play our part in sustaining the life of the community. And Paul ends verse 7 by saying that we have other obligations as well as taxes and so on.

That is to pay respect to those to whom respect is owed and honor to whom honor is owed. Due to high officials and authority figures, those that we might call the great and the good.

Let us appropriately doff our caps to them, Paul is saying. Now, it's that thought of obligation or owing that Paul takes over into the next section.

That's really the bridge to follow his thinking. So look with me at verse 8. Owe no one anything except to love each other.

[9 : 27] For the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. So he is saying discharge all your debts and obligations. Pay your taxes.

Pay your bills. But friends, there is one debt, one obligation that you can never fully pay off. Something that you can never say it's done. And I never need to think about it again.

And with most debts, we can come to the point where the thing is done. Even if it's a mortgage. Some of you will have mortgages or have had mortgages. And with a mortgage, it may take you 25 years to pay it off, mayn't it?

You might be 30 when you start paying it. You might be 55 or 60 by the time you finish paying it. But eventually, you pay your last payment. And you breathe a sigh of relief. And you say, no more. No more.

But in verse 8, Paul is saying there is one debt that you can never make a last payment on. And that is the debt to love each other. Isn't that a lovely idea?

[10 : 26] You think of it like this. You bend over backwards to love other people for the whole of Thursday. And you wake up on Friday morning and you've got to bend over backwards and start loving them again. All the way through Friday.

And what do you then do on a Saturday? Do you say, I've exerted every muscle in my body to love people for two days running. So I'm not going to think a loving thought or do a loving deed for the next 24 hours, at least.

No, says Paul. Your debt is to love other people continually until your dying day. Why? Well, he tells us in the second half of verse 8.

For the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. Now, that phrase about fulfilling the law is really the dominant phrase in this paragraph.

You'll see that Paul repeats it in verse 10. At the end of verse 10. Therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law. He mentions that great law. You shall love your neighbor as yourself in verse 9.

[11 : 25] And you'll notice also in verse 9 that he quotes four of the Ten Commandments, which, of course, lie right at the heart of God's Old Testament law. So what is Paul really saying to Christian people in verses 8, 9, and 10?

What does he mean by this slightly odd phrase, love is the fulfilling of the law? Well, broadly speaking, in Paul's teaching, the law of God, the Old Testament, which is centered upon the Ten Commandments, the law of God has two functions.

The first is to show the unconverted person, the person who's not yet a Christian, his sin and his need of God. And the second function of the law is to show the converted person how to live.

So let's think about those two. First of all, the law of God shows the unconverted person his sin. Now, Paul gives a prime example of this from his very own experience in Romans chapter 7.

And he writes this. If it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. I would not have known what it is to covet. If the law had not said, you shall not covet.

[12 : 40] But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. Now, doesn't Paul's experience exactly tally with ours?

As soon as some law is made explicit, we find that we want to break it. Is that your experience? As soon as you see something that says, don't, you want to. If a smoker sees a sign that says no smoking, he wants to light up.

I remember when I was a very young boy getting onto a bus for the first time near my home in Hertfordshire. And I climbed up onto the top deck of the bus and I saw a sign which read, no spitting.

It would never have occurred to me to spit on that bus if I had not seen that prohibition. But as soon as I saw the sign that said no spitting, I could feel the spit gathering in my mouth.

I think I would have spat if it hadn't been for a very large, muscular-looking lady who was sitting next to me with a big handbag. That's what we're like, isn't it? Now, that was Paul's experience. As soon as he read this law, you shall not covet, every covetous muscle in his brain began to twitch.

[13 : 48] And his point in Romans chapter 7 is that God's law made him feel wretched and ashamed because it showed him his sin. It showed him what a moral reprobate he really was.

But also in Romans 7, Paul is saying what a good thing it is to be shown your sin and to realize that you're condemned by God's law. Because only then do we realize how sinful we are, and it's only when we realize how sinful we are that we then run to Christ to be rescued.

The law condemns us, shows us our sin, but then Christ rescues us from its condemnation by bearing its penalty for us in our place. So that's the first function of the law in Paul's teaching, is to bring us low, to bring us low down, to condemn us, to show us how sinful we are.

We'll never become Christians unless we see that. But the second function of the law, and this brings us straight back to Romans 13, verse 8, is to show us, once we are converted, how to live.

So in this little paragraph, his point is that once we are Christians, we turn back to the Ten Commandments, and as we learn to practice them and to appreciate them and to love them, we begin to fulfill the law.

[15 : 06] In other words, we embody it. Our very lives demonstrate its transforming power. The law is then no longer the sin revealer that condemns us.

It becomes the power that reveals how human beings are to live, which is how human beings can learn to love each other in our relationships. The law teaches us how to love, Paul is saying, how to love our neighbor.

And let me put it like this. Imagine I have standing beside me here a Christian man who has been a Christian for many years and has grown strong and mature in the Christian life.

We can all think of people like that. I'm sure there are plenty here today. People like that are a joy to know, a strong, grown-up Christian. Now, what are some of the characteristics of this strong and well-grown Christian?

Look with me at verse 9. You shall not commit adultery. Now, our Christian man, our Christian friend here, has learned, perhaps over many years, has learned not only not to commit adultery, but is learning to hate adultery.

[16 : 14] Now, he's not perfect. He may be a happily married man. But he still sometimes experiences adulterous inclinations. That's true of most men, isn't it?

But he has learned from the Bible and from his experience of life how much God hates adultery. And he's learned also how destructive adultery is of human happiness and good order.

So this Christian man, as he grows up, is learning to hate adultery. Not simply not to do it, but learning to hate it. He sees the misery that it brings to the lives of so many people who fall into it.

He sees how this commandment against adultery is a wonderful protector and guardian of marriage. So in his understanding, this commandment not only curbs his own sinful inclinations, it also greatly enhances his appreciation of his own wife and the value of his own marriage.

He realizes that the commandment against adultery is a commandment that promotes and protects love of his neighbor, while it promotes and protects marriage.

[17 : 23] So it may be negative in form. You shall not. But it's wonderfully positive in its power to protect marriage and thus to protect the whole community, which depends upon strong marriages for its strength and durability.

We'll take the next commandment that Paul mentions in verse 9. You shall not murder. Now, our mature Christian man, again, has learned to get that commandment deeply into his system.

Now, he's not perfect. He's not perfect. Just as he is capable of sometimes entertaining adulterous thoughts, there are also times when he entertains murderous inclinations.

So if somebody treats him badly, insults him or robs him or treats him with contempt, the thought may flash through his mind, if I could get my hands around that man's neck, I would squeeze the life out of him.

But he doesn't do that because his study of the Bible and his experience of life in the world is teaching him to hate murder. The Bible shows him how valuable human life is, how each human being is made in the image of God, and how important it is, therefore, to protect and nourish human life.

[18 : 37] Now, I won't take up much more time with the other two commandments, which Paul quotes there, but exactly the same things could be said about them. So the commandment against stealing teaches us to respect other people's property and thus to love them, the owners.

And the commandment against coveting teaches us to live contentedly with what we have and not to get cross and jealous of other people who have things that we've not got ourselves.

So as we get these commandments deep into our systems, by studying them and thinking about them, we learn to love other people more truly.

How short-sighted it is and how ignorant it is when people sometimes characterize Christianity as a list of thou shalt nots, as though Christians are a bunch of sour old killjoys.

Not at all. The commandments are all about life and how to live life to the full. And as Paul is pointing out here, they're all about how to love other people. To despise the commandments is to hate life and to hate other people.

[19 : 46] So if I start murdering people and living promiscuously and stealing people's property and blackening their names by telling lies about them and making myself miserable by wanting things that they have and I haven't, I shall make the whole world around me a wretched place, characterized by brutality, lust, and all the horrors that degrade and diminish our humanity.

So Paul is saying love others. Live this committed life of love towards others and you will fulfill the law of God. In other words, in your life, you will fill it out.

You'll embody it. And you will enable other people to see what the law of God really means in practice. And then they will stop calling God's law a killjoy. And they'll start seeing how it nourishes human beings and helps them to grow up into their full stature.

To love other people is to behave towards them as God has behaved towards us. And to go back to chapter 12, verse 2, learning to love others is part of having our thinking transformed and our minds renewed.

Now it's very challenging teaching, isn't it? But by the grace of God, it is possible to grow into people who more and more learn how to love others as we learn to love and practice the commandments.

[21 : 09] Well, secondly, now let's turn to verses 11 to 14. If verses 8 to 10 teach us that love fulfills the law, verses 11 to 14 teach us to live in the light of the approaching dawn.

If I can put it like that, to live in the light of the approaching dawn. In these four verses, Paul is giving us yet another incentive to live a transformed life of Christian godliness.

And this incentive here is all to do with history, with where we're up to in God's great historical plan. And Paul's message, look at verse 11, is wake up.

Wake up, friends. Our full and final rescue, our salvation, our full and final rescue, is just round the corner. The night is far gone, the day is at hand.

It's as though Paul is sounding a kind of divine alarm clock. He's saying, do you realize what hour it is, brothers and sisters? It's much later than you think.

[22 : 12] It may still be dark outside, but it's six o'clock in the morning. This is no time to be pressing the snooze button and rolling over for another 20 minutes. Time to be up. Paul is contrasting here night with day and darkness with light.

And he's picturing the present period of time in which we're living, the time before the return of Christ, as the night time. The hours of darkness. This is the period of time where the devil is still active and prowls about like a roaring lion and exercises power over people's lives and thinking.

But Paul is saying to Christian people, let's begin to live the life of the world to come, the life of the coming dawn, even now, while we're still living in the world of darkness.

Let our lives lived in the old world already show the standards and characteristics of the new world. The power of darkness is all around us still, but, friends, he's saying the dawn is coming.

So, halfway through verse 12, let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us walk properly, fittingly, as in the daytime.

[23 : 23] So let's live lives as those who belong to the new order, the new world. So what are these works of darkness that we're to cast off? Well, he gives us a few examples of them in verse 13.

This is not an exhaustive list. It's not meant to be, but he picks out some of the most obvious. He mentions orgies, drunkenness, sexual immorality and sensuality, quarreling and jealousy.

You might describe that as the nightlife of the old world. I sometimes find myself, as I'm sure you do, on the streets of Glasgow on a Friday or Saturday evening.

And I see verse 13. These words I've just read out. There it is, on the streets, isn't it? Groups of people, some of them younger, some of them not so young, who are, look at my fingers, having a good time.

But it's not a good time, is it? Eat too much, drink far too much, perhaps find a sexual partner, shout, quarrel, behave badly.

[24 : 30] It's the opposite of having a good time. It speaks of boredom and despair and lovelessness. There's a sense there that life is somehow rapidly slipping away, that death is fast approaching, so I'd better make the best of a bad job and try and squeeze a little tiny drop of pleasure out of my wretched existence, even if I run the risk of liver disease and sexually transmitted infection and a black eye or a sore head when I walk into a lamppost.

Boom. Now Paul is saying, Christian brothers and sisters, this is no way to live. Let's live in a way that befits the daytime, not the nighttime.

Let's cast off all that stuff and put on the armor of light. In the year 386 A.D., there was a brilliant young professor of rhetoric in the Italian city of Milan whose name was Augustin and he was about 32 years old.

Now Augustin had been brought up in a Christian household, in a Christian family in North Africa, but he had long since abandoned his Christian roots and he was living the typical godless life that many intellectuals of his generation lived.

But when he was in Milan, he began to drift back into Christian circles, though without repentance. And one day, he was sitting in the garden of a Christian friend, feeling very sad and very depressed by life, and he heard a child singing nearby and the child sang these words, Tolle legge, tolle legge, which is Latin and it means pick up and read, pick up and read.

[26 : 13] So he took this as a kind of message. He got up from his chair, he went into the house of his Christian friend and he picked up the first book he could touch. It was a volume of Paul's letters. And he opened Paul's letters and his eyes fell upon these two verses, 13 and 14.

And he read, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ. And that is exactly what he did very soon afterwards.

Reading those words proved to be a life-changing moment. And within a very short time he was transformed from being a promiscuous young intellectual into a great Christian leader and teacher.

And he spent the remaining 45 years of his life preaching the gospel and writing books which have decisively fashioned and strengthened the Christian churches ever since. Now that phrase in verse 14, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, is a rather strange phrase.

But I think Paul means clothe yourself with his character and his characteristics. Learn him and his ways. Become like him. To grow in the Christian life is to become more and more like Jesus.

[27 : 26] And look at the second half of verse 14 because that must accompany the first half. Put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh to gratify its desires.

In other words, don't buy in crates of alcohol and then invite the wrong people round. Don't go to places where you know there'll be orgies and temptations that you can't resist. So friends, let's take to our hearts this vivid picture of night and day.

It's still dark outside. I know the sun's shining, but we live in a dark world. But it will soon be day, says Paul. Let's cast off, therefore, the characteristics of the night time and live our lives in broad daylight in response to the gospel, doing nothing of which we might be ashamed.

Let's wake up from sleep because, verse 11, salvation, our final rescue when Jesus returns and takes us to be with him in his glorious kingdom.

Salvation, says Paul, is nearer to us now in August 2012 than it was when we first believed, which was some time ago.

[28 : 37] Let's bow our heads and we'll pray. we thank you, dear Heavenly Father, for this glorious life of the daytime to which your Apostle Paul calls us.

And we pray that you will give us fresh energy in our hearts as we think of your mercies, as we think of what the Lord Jesus has done for us and what you have done for us through him. We pray that you'll give us fresh grace and courage to cast off the works of darkness, to walk as in the daytime and to learn to fulfill the law as we learn to love others.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.