

*A Change of Clothes*; Romans 13.11–14 [sermon manuscript]

Andrew Stuart

“What time is it?”

If you’re like me and you don’t have a wrist watch, this is a question you are forced to ask on a daily basis. I am constantly having to turn to my neighbour and say, “do you have the time?” Even if you *do* have a watch, the reason you look at your watch is because you are wondering what time it is. The question is still there.

“What time is it?”

It’s not at all a useless question – it’s a question we *need* to ask, and ask repeatedly throughout the day. We need to ask the question if we want to be faithful to the commitments we’ve made. How many times have you been in a situation when someone showed up late to your meeting and said, “Oh, gee, sorry, I lost track of the time”?

Knowing the time helps us to know how to act in a given situation. It helps us know when to need to get out of bed in the morning, it helps us know when we need to head out to a meeting. It lets us know if we need to hurry up or if we’re able to slow down.

Knowing the time determines the proper way to act . This is why time is such an important concern in our passage today. The Spirit of God, through Paul, is wanting to call us into a way of living in light of what time it is. The sort of time we are talking about today is concerned with much more than just the time of day. Today we are talking about a *cosmic* sense of time, having to do with the trajectory and goal of history itself. This kind of time isn’t told by a clock, it is told by Holy Scripture.

Our passage begins in verse 11: “And *do* this, knowing the time”

Before we can understand the time Paul is talking about here, we need to understand the pivotal event of all of human history: the event of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God. For Paul, and the whole of Scripture the event of Jesus’ death, and resurrection is the very center of history.

Jesus' life was the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy that predicted the coming of a deliver who would make things right in the world. Jesus the one the prophet Isaiah was talking about when he said

"In the time of my favour I will answer you, in the day of salvation I will help you; I will keep you and make you to be a covenant for the people to restore the land and to reassign its desolate inheritances, to say to the captives, 'Come out,' and those in darkness, 'be free!'" (Is . 49:8-9a)

Jesus has ushered in this time of the LORD's favour, this day of salvation.

The time is this: The light of Jesus has come into the world and has dealt the decisive blow to the forces of darkness.

[11] "And do this, knowing the *time*, that it is already the hour for you to awaken from sleep; for now salvation is nearer to us than when we first believed. [12b] the night is almost gone and the day is near."

It is time to wake up from sleep because the time of full salvation (our full deliverance) is nearer now than when we first believed in Christ. The day of Salvation *has* indeed come in Christ but we can all recognize that darkness is still at work in the world. It is on its way out, but it is still hanging on. A simple glance at the latest news tells us that evil is still at work – war, violent atrocities (this month - execution of 80 people in the DPRK), homelessness, corporate greed, institutionalized systems of injustice, hunger. And the darkness isn't just outside of us, its inside of us as well, trying to draw us into those things which ultimately lead to death.

The day of salvation Paul is talking about is called the Day of the Lord, and this day is near. This is the day when Christ will come back and judge the world. We tend to fear this day, we tend to fear judgement. But judgement is a good thing because it establishes *justice* in the world. It makes things right. And Judgement includes a positive bringing of what is good, but it also must include a negative getting-rid-of the bad.

The day cannot come unless the night ends.

And the night, we are told is almost gone, the day is at hand. It's time to wake up from drowsiness, from unresponsiveness, from unpreparedness. It's time quit

being preoccupied with the wrong things. It's time to be roused from sleep, to be alert, to occupy ourselves with the things that really matter. The light of Christ has come into the world, and it is about to come in its fullness.

Can you feel it? Can you feel what Paul is saying here? The metaphor of the breaking of day, the sun about to peek over the horizon. But this is more than a metaphor because Paul is talking about the actual appointed time of Christ's return.

Whether you've felt it or not, whether you believe it or not, history is drawing nearer to that day – to the time when the things that are wrong in the world will be made right, a time where the Lord of all will come back out of heaven and he will bring the full light of day. This is the time we have been waiting for.

In verse 11 we are told to “do this.” The this that are supposed to be doing is found in the previous verse. We are to love each other and love our neighbours in light of the time.

In verse 13 we are commanded to live in a way *becoming* of the day. This means we “putting off” the deeds of darkness and “putting on” the armor of light. In case we have any question as to what the deeds of darkness are, Paul lists 3 pairs of examples: carousing and drunkenness, sexual immorality and sensuality, quarreling and jealousy, which speak specifically to issues of division and strife between Jewish and Gentile believers in the Roman church.

Finally, in light of what time it is, we are commanded to [14] “put on the Lord Jesus Christ.” This command is the focal point of the text. Putting on Christ is, somehow, the way we fulfill the command to love each and our neighbours. Putting on Christ is also effectively the putting on of the armor of light.

But what does “putting on the Lord Jesus Christ” mean? Is Paul calling for a moral code? Is he calling for us to imitate Jesus' behaviour?

If he is, I think we'd be tempted to give up right now, just throw in the towel, because we know that we cannot imitate Jesus. We know how sin has affected every part of our human existence, and we feel a deep inability to live up to any moral standard placed on us - any sort of *law* that we'd have to meet.

But Paul isn't *primarily* talking about ethics here.

The command to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ” is not a call for imitation, it is a call for participation, resulting in transformation. The command to put on Christ is effectively a command to participate in the life which God has made available to us in and through Jesus Christ, and this life is the very life of the eternal and living God.

For Paul, union with Christ is foundational. Yes, ethics and morals flow from this union, but the union itself is emphasized. Paul knows that the only way we can love is if we are somehow become more like Jesus, if the Spirit of Christ works in us to transform us. It is our union with Christ that enables us to become like him, and we are exhorted to participation, to “put off” and “put on.”

But why must the deeds of darkness be put off?

Because the life of God into which we are called to participate is utterly incompatible with sin and darkness. They cannot coexist in the same vessel, and so the positive command to “put on Christ” must be accompanied with the negative to put off darkness. But even this is not something we are left to do on our own, for, says Paul in Romans 8, it is by the Spirit that we put to death the misdeeds of the body. The Spirit turns our eyes to Christ and animates Christ life in us, and enables us to put off darkness.

The call for our participation in the life of the living God through Christ comes to us as pure grace. Not only does God transform us as we participate, but he has made the very condition for participation possible. God, in his free love and mercy entered into human existence in Jesus of Nazareth. The eternal Son of God *put on* flesh without reservation, and become a man. You could say that God, in Jesus, put *us* on. He put on our humanity, and all that comes along with it - temptation, suffering, pain, death.

The Son became like us, and lived a human life as it was meant to be lived – in obedience, love and fellowship with God the Father.

And the Son of God, who put us on, was put to death out of his obedience to the will of the Father. And he was raised to life because death does not have the power to keep him in the grave. In our union with Christ, we are brought into his death, but also into new life, somehow included with him in his inheritance we become sons and daughters of the living God. Our union with Christ is predicated on the fact that he come down to us and put us on.

This is what John Calvin calls the wondrous exchange, the mystery of Jesus putting us on, and us being clothed with him, included in his benefits.

“This is the wondrous exchange made by his boundless goodness. Having become with us the Son of Man, he has made us with himself sons of God. By his own descent to the earth he has prepared our ascent to heaven. Having received our mortality, he has bestowed on us his immortality. Having undertaken our weakness, he has made us strong in his strength. Having submitted to our poverty, he has transferred to us his riches. Having taken upon himself the burden of unrighteousness with which we were oppressed, he has clothed us with his righteousness.” (Institutes for the Christian Religion, 4.17.2)

In light of the time – of what God has done in Christ, let us wake up. Let us put on Christ, the light of the world and get ready for the day we have long awaited. Let us answer the call to participate in the life of God and to be found in him at Christ’s return.

Amen.