

Sermon Title: Wake from Sleep
Biblical Text: Romans 13:11-14
Teaching Series: Justified by Love
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Romans 13:11-14

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.

We're coming to the end of another chapter and movement in Paul's letter. Remember, Paul wrote this letter before he traveled to the city, hoping to both instruct these new church communities that were popping up in Rome and to inquire about support for his future work in Spain (16:24). And after eleven chapters of theological instruction, in this section he's been talking about how we live as Christians, especially in our relationships.

- With God (12:1-2).
- With ourselves (12:3).
- With our church family and neighbors (12:4-13).
- With enemies (12:14-21).

- With the government (13:1-7).
- With the Law (13:8-10).
- And now we'll consider our relationship with the return of Christ (13:11-14).

After Jesus' resurrection, he ascended to heaven. That is, he authoritatively takes his seat on the throne, where he rules and reigns today. But his ascension also means he physically lifted up into the sky. As his disciples looked up to the heavens, they were visited by two angels, two men in *white robes*. They said to them, *Read Acts 1:11 ... "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."* This good word delivered to Jesus' earliest followers is that he would return. Jesus will come again. Today we live between the first coming and the second coming of Christ. Between "Christ has come!" and "Christ will come again!" We live in a world where the kingdom of Jesus has begun to show up ... but is not yet fully realized. As the great English preacher and theologian John Stott said, we live *"between two worlds."* Between the world God made good yet has been marred by sin. And the world God will remake one day.

In our passage today, Paul helps us navigate these two worlds. In some ways he's been doing that from the start of chapter 12, *Read Romans 12:2 ... Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.* But now he expounds upon the idea. He calls one world the *day*, the other he calls the *night*. One is a world of light and righteousness and life. The other is a world of darkness and sin and death. Christians are those who essentially live with one foot in this world and one in the next; citizens of heaven and of earth. Life with God is about living between these two worlds. You likely feel this pressure and burden everyday though you may not have language for it. But let's think about this. Last

week we voted for a new mayor, and will again in April. As Chicagoans we voted as a way of taking ownership of our lives as people who call this city home. As Christians though, we voted knowing our ultimate well-being of our city lay in another world.

Two worlds. Darkness. Light. That's what I'd like to talk about today. I want to talk about how we live as people of light amidst darkness. It's not about doing; it's about healing. It's not about pointing at the evil and acting good; it's about being renewed. And so in order to be people of the light we'll need to learn or relearn to trust the light. You see, I think we've been taught and even had experiences that told us the light, the day time, the world of Jesus' kingdom ... was bad, false, and even harmful. Paul addresses that hurt today. Here's how we'll walk through the passage ...

- The light is *good*.
- The light is *true*.
- The light is *healing*.

[Prayer]

Movement 1: The Light is Good (vv.11-12, Isaiah 9:2)

The Apostle begins our passage by painting a picture. *Read Romans 13:11-12 ... 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.* Paul's talking about time. *We know the time*, he says. *The hour has come. What's the time? What's the hour? Well, it's time to wake up.* He

says, the night has passed and morning has broken. It's a metaphor about coming alive to the reality of the light, the good new world God is making.

But before we can understand the goodness and power of the day, we have to realize and admit we've been asleep. We have to contend with the pain and trauma of the night, the darkness. Otherwise putting on what Paul calls the armor of light will be just another trite spiritual habit and metaphor with little to know meaning. You see, many of us don't know the light is **good**. We know it feels good or at least it's supposed to, but we don't know that it is good. That it's good news. That it's good for our souls. That it's the world we've been waiting for. I think that's because we've been taught to put on a Christian culture and Christian religion, but not Christ.

Speaking during the Advent season to St. John's Church in Salisbury, Connecticut in 1996, Fleming Rutledge wove together Paul's themes of the two worlds and light and darkness. She said, "*The more the world outside lights its trees, the more sparkle and flutter it throws about, the more it sings ... the more you will want to immerse yourselves in the special mood of Advent ... Advent is designed to show that the meaning of Christmas is diminished to the vanishing point if we are unwilling to take a fearless inventory of the darkness*" (*The Bible and the New York Times*, 26). The sparkle at Christmastime is Christian culture. It's spirituality and tradition. And it often feels good. But it's not Christ. It's not the substance of our faith. It's not the good. It's not the light. But in order to wake up to the new day of salvation, we must, as Rutledge suggests, *take a fearless inventory of the darkness*. We must learn to take off the culture of spirituality and moralism and religion in order to embrace the genuine gospel.

So, *what is the darkness?*

Darkness is life lived in this world. It's an existence limited by the broken imagination, bound within this age. Throughout the Bible the language of darkness is a way of expressing the absence or opposite of light ... of truth ... of righteousness. A familiar Christmastime passage is Isaiah 9:2, ***Read Isaiah 9:2 ...***

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone. Isaiah's words have a double

meaning. In his day people were languishing under war and corrupt leadership. In our day we are a people trapped in a world, just as sick with sin. We long for light. We long for a new king. We long for peace. Yet in the middle of our longing, we grow impatient. We settle for cheap thrills that feel like light or a better king or a better mayor or some semblance of peace, but these are not the substance.

While we do this universally, it also happens personally. And at the personal level Paul calls these, ***"works of darkness"*** (v.11). We'll get to his specific examples in a bit, but for now it's important to acknowledge that it's these works which make us think we are already awake when we're still asleep. That we've seen the light. That we've put on the armor of light. When in reality we've only donned the latest Christian fashion trend. It's sparkle. It's not the true light. It feels good. But it's not good.

What are we talking about? We're talking about a false Christianity which has no need for Christ. That's the lie. That's where we need healing. That's why we're still asleep. That's why much of the world is still asleep. The darkness is a vision of the good without any accountability, confession, or lament. We're talking about what German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer called, "cheap grace." In his book *The*

Cost of Discipleship he explains, “*Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate*” (44-45). Bonhoeffer is saying grace does not just feel good. In fact, grace doesn't always feel good at first. Grace can hurt, because it pulls us away from our functional saviors. But that's what make grace actually good: it's light filled with truth and beauty. It heals us.

When we say that the light is **good**, we're saying that it has integrity. Many of our expressions of Christianity *seem* moral and loving. But when we pull back the layers we see a lack of goodness, it lacks integrity.

- When we pull back the layers of many conservative churches we see lots of talk of holiness and obedience, but far too often little expressions of God's love.
- When we pull back the layer of many liberal church we see lots of works of grace and love, but far too little appreciation and submission to God's truth.
- When we pull back the layers of a church like ours—which takes up a third way in many respects somewhere between conservative and liberal—we see a healthy balance perhaps, but also pride in that we see the world better than those at the extremes.

We see flashes of the light in each of these cultural contexts. Yet, in all three we have to be careful. We must continued to take inventory of the darkness in our hearts. We must allow the fullness of grace and repentance and confession to lay hold of our lives. You see, Paul says *the night is gone*. It's time to put away false expressions grace and inhabit the world where the light is *good*. This is where Paul takes us next ...

Movement 2: The Light is True (vv.12,13, Colossians 3:9-10)

Not only does the light have integrity, not only is the light *good* ... but the light is *true*. In other words, in the light we see the nature and character of God and are called to live in reflection of who he is. This requires a dual action which Paul writes about all the time in his various correspondence. Look again at v.12. ***Read Romans 13:12 ... 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.*** Again Paul reaches for a metaphor. We cast off. We put on. We cast off the works of darkness, those faux expression of religion and morality. And we put on the armor of light. We put on clothes fit for the day, fit for a life with one foot in this world and one in the world to come.

As I mentioned, Paul writes about this to other churches like the Colossians and Ephesians. And it's that Colossians passage which is most extensive and I think most helpful for our investigation. So let's turn there. Colossians 3. In Romans he talks about light and darkness, alluding to two *worlds*. In Colossians he talks about two *selves*. ***Read Colossians 3:9-10 ... Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is***

being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. There is an old self which is wrapped up in darkness of this world. There is a new self which is wrapped up in light of the world that is breaking into this one. Yet, it's clear there is a battle going on.

In Romans 13 Paul doesn't tell us to just put on new cloths, but armor. *Did you notice that?* Though we are a new creation in Christ, with a new heart and habits, we still battle the urges and challenges of our old self. *Don't we?* Paul even gets specific about these in Romans. Look at v.13. ***Read Romans 13:13 ... Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy.*** The light is *true*. There is a moral way to live. There is an immoral way to live. There is right. There is wrong. There is helpful and nurturing and healing. And there's destructive and sinful behavior. Though the light is *good*, it's not permissive. The light has integrity and reveals truth. The light is *true*.

In the darkness we develop some dysfunctional relationships. Specifically, Paul says, with sex, substances, and people. Each of these are good gifts, yet we often live with them in disordered ways. A way of living which belongs to this world. So, *how do we enjoy sex, alcohol, and people as those who live in the light?* In short, self control.

- Orgies, sexual immorality, and sensuality are all disordered expressions of God's good gift of sex. Instead of enjoying intimacy as brothers and sisters we look at each other with lust. Self-control as men and women is learning the beauty of friendship with men and women, without sex. Marva Dawn makes a distinction between social sexuality and genital sexuality. Social

sexuality is about healthy platonic same-sex and opposite-sex relationships. Genital sexuality is sexual intimacy and intercourse. Dawn observes that our lack of discipleship in social sexuality, about how to be friends as men and women, has led to unthinkable confusion in genital sexuality. It's disordered. Instead of enjoying sex within the boundaries of marriage and mutuality, we ask sex to give us pleasure on our terms. Self-control with respect to marriage and sex is cultivating and celebrating the covenant when both husband and wife seek it. Self-control is about learning social sexuality, how to relate to others as men and women. You see, we need healing in our relationship with sex.

- Drunkenness is a disordered relationship with God's good gift of alcohol. Instead of enjoying wine, beer, and good Old Fashioned with joyful gratitude we often ask a drink (or multiple drinks) to bring us a gladness only God can. You see, usually we drink too much because we are sad or scared or lonely. And so we drink to quiet those heavy emotions, instead of asking God to meet us in our sorrow. But the best alcohol can do is give us a temporary mask. It can let you stay in the darkness, and avoid the light. It can cover our pain for a moment, making it invisible to others or ourselves. Yet, behind the mask our pain gets deeper. Self-control with alcohol means seeing alcohol for what it is ... a delightful drink, not as a savior ... something that's meant to be enjoyed but not centered. We need healing in our relationship with alcohol.
- Quarreling and jealousy is a disordered relationship with God's good gift of human relationship. Instead of showing love and blessing and rejoicing with others, we fight and desire what they have and wish it was ours. We ask

anger and possessions to give us control and value that only God can. Self-control with respect to people is about knowing that anger is meant to be expressed out of love, not fear and control and covetousness. We need healing in our relationship with each other.

These are the works we "cast off" ... so we can "put on light." The light that's *true*. We often don't even talk about these things, *do we?* But when we don't, the darkness persists. But in the light there's goodness and truth. Sex, alcohol, and people can be enjoyed in their appropriate measure and order. Because the world to come, the new self is one with self-control. This world is about instant gratification. The world to come is about lasting joy. But a lot of healing is necessary for us to lay hold of this new world and new self ...

Movement 3: The Light is Healing (v.14, Colossians 3:3-5, Genesis 3:8,9,21)

In his *Letter and Papers from Prison*, Bonhoeffer said, *"We must learn to regard people less in the light of what they do or omit to do, and more in the light of what they suffer."* That means the point of the light and dark motif is not to find out who is right and wrong. It's not to divide the room. Rather, when we see ourselves or others crippled by sexual, substance, and relational dysfunction and disorder ... we should have empathy. Because light is not simply good and true, light is *healing*.

When our first parents sinned, they immediately felt shame. We're told they realized they were naked and then they covered themselves with leaves (see Genesis 3:6-7). But their shame was deeper than their skin. When God came

looking for them, Genesis tells us, ***Read Genesis 3:8 ... "the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden."***

Adam and Eve hid in the darkness. The light was good, but it didn't feel good at first. The light was true, and it was exposing their sin and brokenness. *Do you know Satan is a spiritual gaslighter?* He makes them question reality. He convinces them the darkness is safe and would make them feel better. He convinces them the light is bad and deceptive and hurtful.

But then comes the new world ... the morning ... the light ... the new self. God draws near.

God calls Adam and Eve. He knows exactly what's happened. He knows exactly what they've done. But he does not blame or accuse or belittle or shame them. It's not about wrong and right it seems. It's about healing. He simply asks, ***"Where are you?"*** (Genesis 3:9). *Where are you?* When sin and shame, religion or sex or alcohol or anger have trapped you and I into the darkness of shame and fear, God simply asks ... *Where are you?* God invites his image bearers back into relationship with him, back into his light. And even as he delivers consequence, he dispenses grace. ***Read Genesis 3:21 ... And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them.*** He covers them. He closes them in forgiveness, and light, and love, and grace. *Do you see?* The light is ***healing.***

Today God still calls for us. He still draws near. He still cloths us with love and forgiveness. Yet in the wake of Jesus' resurrection we don't put on garments of skin, rather we are clothed and covered in Christ himself. Look how Paul finished the passage. ***Read Romans 13:14 ... But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.*** The way to walk in the light is not

by getting sex and alcohol and relationship right. That's backwards. The way to walk in the light is to **"put on the Lord Jesus Christ"** ... that's the only way to make no provisions for the flesh ... to show self-control ... that's the only way to not gratify the desires of this world ... that's the only way to put off the works of darkness ... put on the Son of light. We receive the healing of the light and then we can walk in the way of the light. *Are you with me?*

This of course takes time. When learning a new way to be human, we wobble and make mistakes and fall short. Back in Colossians Paul gives us hope and power in this. He says, **Read Colossians 3:3-5 ... For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.** Notice, he says **"you have died."** To what? This life. This world. This darkness. Because your life is with Christ. But then he says, **"put to death ... what is earthy in you."** Hmm. You have died. But put to death. This is a paradox. This is like having one foot in this world and one in the next. This like living as people of light amidst the darkness. It's not about rights and wrongs, but about renewal. It's about healing.

This is no sparkle of culture. This is the **goodness** of Christ.

This is no permissiveness. This is the **truth** of an ordered life.

This is not harmful. This light of love brings **healing**.