

Now Is the Time

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on July 24, 2022.

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 (Romans 13:11–14).¹

When the Apostle Paul writes, “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship” (12:1), it is neither a recommendation nor a suggestion but an *appeal*, an impassioned exhortation to worship the Lord with every square inch of our being. It is an appeal not to the merits of man but the mercies of God, not an appeal to lifeless religion but living worship.

Christian worship then is not something relegated to one time, one place, and one practice, but engages all of us, all the time, in every way. We are worshipers only because God sought us in his mercy, saved us by his grace, and sustains us in his love. Our part in worship is never in the achieving but in the receiving and responding. That’s why our obedience is self-sacrificing worship. We aren’t trying to self-sacrificially secure our salvation but are responding to the mercy and grace of God with heart, soul, mind, and strength.

It’s akin to Jesus’ imagery of the cross: “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23). The metaphor is striking: Who daily takes up an instrument of shame, torture, and death? Only the born-again can heed such a self-sacrificing appeal, and even then, only in the strength God gives.

In light of this, Paul says, “you know the time,” not linear time like the hands on a clock but what the Greeks called *kairos*, the moment. Like child labor and birth, it happens at the moment when the baby is ready to arrive. With that first labor pain, it is as if she says, “Mama, now is the time!” Likewise, now is the time to wake up to our calling to worship, casting off the works of evil and putting on Christ through his means of grace.

Wake Up

The problem is the way of the world lulls us to sleep, like a large meal for Sunday lunch. The transition from dessert to nap is minutes in counting. Before we know it, we’re asleep. But unlike a Sunday afternoon nap, spiritual slumber is not a blessing. It’s not the result of God-given rest but worldly engagement and sinful entanglement.

Deceptive as it is, worldliness breeds spiritual lethargy: devotion is replaced with worldly desire; faithfulness gives way to forgetfulness. Like the serpent awaiting lonely Eve, sin lurks at edges of our slumber. How easily we become unconcerned; how quickly we are deceived. That is, until

¹ Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

the Holy Spirit through the Word of God opens the blinds and sounds the alarm: “the hour has come for you to wake from sleep.”

But there is also a future aspect to our knowing the time: Our “salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed.” Our Lord’s return is closer today than it was yesterday; it’s time to prepare ourselves for his arrival and the completion of our salvation, unto glory. But thinking about something as cosmic as our Lord’s return can be hard to imagine, so think about summer cucumbers from my garden. If I want cucumbers tomorrow, waiting until today to plant the seed won’t work. I knew two months ago that if I wanted summer cucumbers, I needed to plant the seed that day. Yet, how many of us live like Christian maturity comes like a store-bought cucumber: no planting, no cultivating, no watering, no waiting. The intersection of our sanctification and glorification doesn’t work that way. It’s time to wake up and work and keep your garden: “The night is far gone; the day is at hand.”

Waking up to the imminence of Christ’s return leads not to reading the signs of the times nor speculation of timing but to conviction in its certainty that translates into living every day to the glory of God. As the apostle John teaches us, “Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure” (1 John 3:2-3). Waking up to the reality and the implications of Christ’s return leads not to apocalyptic self-protection but sanctified self-sacrifice: “everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.”

Cast Off

Just as waking up in the morning involves changing clothes (at least for most of us...), we are to “cast off the works of darkness” and “put on the armor of light.” Typically, what we wear is telling. When I wear a ministerial gown on Sunday mornings, no one wonders who I am or what I do; they know by what I wear. Similarly, as children of light, we wear what is congruent with who we are. Which means we don’t wear “works of darkness”; that’s not who we are.

Think about Paul’s use of the metaphor “darkness.” In a pre-electricity age, revelry was reserved for the dark of night. There are things that people do in the dark that they would never do in the light. They are not noble works but works of sin, seemingly hidden in darkness, and done by those who clothe themselves in the debauchery of their darkened heart.

Of course, there is nothing hidden from the eyes of the Lord. The sage says, “The eyes of the LORD are in every place, keeping watch on the evil and the good” (Prov. 15:3). We who are children of the One who said, “Let there be light” (Gen. 1:3), must cast off the “works of darkness.” As Paul told the Thessalonians, “But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief. For you are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night or of the darkness” (1 Thess. 4:4-5).

Such works of darkness that we are to cast off, in general, refer to any participation in the sinful ways of the world. But Paul specifically lists three pairs of sins to insure we don’t miss the point: “orgies and drunkenness,” “sexual immorality and sensuality,” and “quarreling and jealousy.”

Polite company may wonder how Paul justifies listing an unmentionable with more “respectable” sins, but there is purpose in his categories.

The first two continue Paul’s metaphor of darkness or night. Immoral sexual excess and drunkenness are not only descriptions of debauchery, they also were part of the Roman party scene, parties in the dark of night, certainly no place for children of light. That Christians were present at these drunken sex parties is debatable. That they existed and that they were no place for a Christian is not.

Similarly, “sexual immorality” and “sensuality” are sins of a kind, linked in their temptation as well as their cultural provocation. Culturally apparent, they become insidiously intertwined with ordinary life, becoming less offensive even societally embraced. Pervasive sensuality numbs the collective conscience, tearing down taboos, and welcoming perversion. The siren of conscience can be quieted, and sadly sexual immorality and sensuality are just the sins to do it. Casting off these sins always begins with acknowledging their presence.

The last pair of sins Paul gives seem tame in comparison, which should give us pause. Wondering how vile “quarreling and jealousy” can be compared to orgies and drunkenness tells volumes of how we disdain the sins of our culture while justifying those we consider less offensive. It is quite easy to be appalled at the sins of the world while harboring sin in our heart. It is no wonder that such sins slither their way among us. Many a church has hemorrhaged from the strife-causing actions of one or a few, and, as the apostle James puts it, “where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice” (James 3:16). Quarreling gets dismissed as a zeal for doctrinal precision, jealousy gets justified as God-ordained aspiring, and the church becomes a colosseum of chaos, a venue for “every vile practice.” Lucifer may yawn at the drunken orgies of the darkness, but he’s wide awake for a party of strife among the children of light.

Of course, Paul’s pairings are not exhaustive. He’s giving examples, ranging from the unthinkable to the sinfully respectable. His call to us is not to categorize but to cast off, all styles and sizes. But casting off is only half of Paul’s wardrobe instruction; the other half is “put on.”

Put On

Paul uses the verb translated “put on” twice here. First, he tells us to “put on the armor of light,” or “weapons of light” (NET). Paul doesn’t specify the weapons, likely because he means the term generally. However, we may infer that such weapons are at our disposal and means of God’s gracious appointment. Furthermore, Paul adds that we are to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ,” revealing that what we put on, the adorned armor, the wielded weapons, are not of our own fabrication but are of him, and through him, and to him. For, there is nothing to put on, no protection provided apart from Christ.

But as we consider what Paul means by “put on,” consider what a privilege this is! Such a charge is not an option for those who remain dead in their sin. Only those who are alive to Christ through faith can adorn the armor of a new identity. Paul is not merely encouraging a change of clothes. I am no more protected from evil robed in my self-righteousness than the filthy rags of

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unrighteousness. No, the armor of light is exclusively for children of light, those who trust in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, our Redeemer, our Defender, our Lord.

And so, we put on the impenetrable, adorn the unconquerable, wielding the warfare weaponry of the ordinary means of grace. We go the Word of God, not for worldly entertainment but as the rule of faith, reading it, praying it, singing it, preaching it. Only the dead and defenseless consider it an ordinary book; we know it as the infallible Word of life. And according to the Word, we are faithful to be fed at the Lord's table. As we eat the bread and drink the wine, we see the emblems of the gospel that we profess, but we not only see we partake, putting on the Lord Jesus Christ, who strengthens us in his grace. And should we grow weary or discouraged, we look back to our baptism, where God set us apart as his covenant child, gave us his promises, and guaranteed the victory.

And we pray. At the beginning of every week, together in corporate worship, we collectively sing our prayers, pray for one another, for our neighbor, and the world. Every week, we are reminded that we do not wage war alone but in a battalion of brotherhood, on our knees. And from this first day of the week, we continue into the rest of the week, praying without ceasing, not because we have more to say than was said on Sunday but because we enjoy every moment in the presence of our Lord.

And so, through his Word, sacrament, and prayer, our Lord has equipped us for our calling. For our God has not called us to put on anything that he has not already provided and prepared for us. So, let us "Be up and awake to what God is doing! . . . Get out of bed and get dressed! Don't loiter and linger, waiting until the very last minute. Dress yourselves in Christ, and be up and about!" (MSG). For, now is the time!