

## **Romans 13:8–14**

*8 Owe 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.*

*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. 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 quarrelling and jealousy. 14Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.*

Faithful God, how blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Sanctify us by your Word and Spirit so that we may glorify you in the company of the faithful; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

If you know me even a little bit, you know that I am someone who plans and organizes his time. It probably started during my undergraduate years at Winona State, I just didn't see the point in waiting until the last couple of hours or staying up all night to cram for a test.

This certainly became more important when I started seminary. I was already doing a full-time job and helping raise two young daughters, I needed to plan time for papers, tests, and studying, doing so around my other responsibilities. I would rather be done with my work and enjoy my time, rather than having the worry tainting my other activities, or sit for hours right before the deadline wracking my brain and panicking trying to finish something.

This is especially true for sermon writing. I know I've mentioned this before, but if I'm working on my sermon on the Saturday before church something has gone drastically wrong! Many of my colleagues do this, or even try to finish it up Sunday morning, and I just can't understand! Maybe they think the pressure helps them work better. I think they're nuts.

While looming deadlines don't usually improve the quality of the work done under them (I feel that they may, in fact, hinder it), they do lend urgency to our actions.

But what about the most important deadline of all? Can Romans 13's proclaimers say our lives would differ if we knew with absolute certainty that Christ was going to return on, just for example, September 7, 2020?

Would we feel any urgency to rearrange our priorities if we knew Christ was returning tomorrow? Would we look at things any differently? Would we treat people any differently if we knew exactly when Christ was going to come back?

If we knew the world was going to end in the next few days, some of us might try to squeeze all of the life we could into that time. We might try to travel to at least some of the places we always wanted to see. We might try to do the things we never found the time for before. Some people would simply spend their last days indulging all of their desires and fantasies. They would say that they may as well enjoy themselves, they are going to die soon, right?

Of course, the proposition that we can know in advance when Christ will return is absurd. After all, even the incarnate Son of God didn't know when he'd return. Not even heaven's angels share God's knowledge of when our world as we know it will end.

That lack of precise knowledge, however, has at least helped contribute to spiritual indifference, even among some Christians. In fact, in combination with Paul's emphasis on God's amazing grace, uncertainty about Jesus' return apparently led some of the Roman Christians to largely ignore God's law. So, in Romans 13 Paul tries to inject some ethical spiritual urgency into the believers in Rome with words about the nearness of the Lord's return.

Of course, even today, some Christians still seem almost preoccupied with the details of the return of Christ. We've allowed our differences of interpretation over the timeline for Christ's return to divide us. Some Christians write endless books and preach countless sermons about it. Some even say that they've figured out when Christ will actually return, yet none of them have been right so far.

In our text, however, Paul calls his readers to be concerned with more than the date of the return of Jesus Christ. He calls us to live in faithful ways in the constant expectation of Christ's imminent return. Such lives, after all, mirror God's saving work in Christ.

Paul calls Jesus' followers to let the nearness of Christ's return shape their lives. Verse 11 sounds his alarm to "wake up" from what he calls our "slumber." After all, Paul reminds his readers, Christ's return is nearer now than when we first believed.

It reminds me of when I would take the family on long car rides invariably someone would ask a question like, "How much longer, where are we, or are we there yet?" If I was not sure about exactly how long, or how many miles were left, my response would be, "We are getting closer." It was not the most informative answer, but it was all that I knew.

With the passage of time since it had faithfully responded to God's grace, Paul's Roman audience should have been growing in its relationship with God in Christ; they should have been "getting closer." Yet, Paul seems to imply that their lives didn't reflect God's work in Christ for them. Some of the Roman members had apparently become less than fully spiritually alert.

Paul, however, says that they don't have time for such spiritual lethargy, because it's getting late in the day. That certainly turned out to be true for Paul's Roman audience. While Christ didn't return within their lifetime, the congregations time was short. After all, perhaps only six years after Paul wrote this letter to the Romans, the Emperor Nero threw all of the Christians out of Rome. Those who weren't killed in the persecution literally went underground. Both Peter and Paul may have been killed in that particular persecution.

Though we don't live under the threat of immediate persecution today, we too live on borrowed time. After all, even if Christ doesn't end the world with his return, he may come for any of us at any moment. Not one of even the healthiest of us can be certain that we will even live to the end of the day, for instance.

How, then, do Christians who are on borrowed time live? How do our ethics reflect our status as those whose time on this earth is short? How does the nearness of Christ's return particularly affect our relationships? Essentially Paul insists those who know that Christ's return is imminent must feel the urgency to obey God's call to "love your neighbor as yourself." It's an ethic that's as old as Leviticus 19:18 but also as contemporary (to Paul's original audience) as Jesus' words in Matthew 22:39.

Is there any timelier message for a world that's so deeply divided about how to respond to things like a global pandemic, racial injustice, and climate change? In an environment that politicizes nearly every moral issue, it's naturally far easier to demonize people with whom we don't agree than actively love them.

Paul reminds his readers that those of us who know that our time is short let God's gracious love for us shape our relationships with the people around us. In fact, God's love for all

of us shapes not only our relationships with fellow Christians, but even with unbelievers, our enemies, and even members of other political parties.

Paul even goes so far as to suggest that Christians' highest obligation toward each other is to love each other. That may be the meaning of his words, "Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another..." While Jesus' followers have various obligations towards other people, our most urgent obligation is to love them.

Yet even Jesus' followers sometimes think of love as an attraction that people who, for instance, plan to marry or actually are married feel. Love, as the Bible describes it, however, is primarily an action and an attitude. Scripture shows that to love is to view and treat people as God in Christ would treat them. Those who love, want only God's very best for our neighbors. Sometimes showing that love means going beyond what is good for us and sacrificing ourselves, for the other. That is a scary sticking point for some people. Why would I want to sacrifice my wellbeing, my money, my position and power, for someone else; especially someone who is different than me, or maybe even looks undeserving to me? I guess you'd have to ask Jesus, he's the one who showed us what to do by making the ultimate sacrifice for us, and none of us are deserving of it.

It reminds me of a story I've seen, and maybe even used before, but I like it a lot. In her book *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*, Anne Lamott recounts a story told by Jack Kornfield of the Spirit Rock Meditation Center in Woodacre, CA. It's about an eight-year-old boy whose younger sister was dying of leukemia. He was told that without a blood transfusion she would die.

His parents explained to him that his blood was probably compatible with hers and, if so, he would be the blood donor. They asked him if they could test his blood. He said, "Sure." They did and learned it was a good match. They asked if he would donate to his sister a pint of his blood because it could be her only chance of living. He said he would have to think about it overnight.

The next day he went to his parents and said he was willing to donate the blood. So, they took him to the hospital where he was placed on a gurney beside his six-year-old sister. Both of them were hooked up to IV's. A nurse withdrew a pint of blood from the boy, which was then eventually transferred to his sister's IV.

The boy lay on his gurney in silence while the blood dripped into his sister, until the doctor came over to see how he was doing. Then the boy opened his eyes and asked, "How soon until I start to die?"

This boy made his decision assuming that it would kill him, just to save his sister. Now I'm guessing that although he loved his sister he probably also didn't get along with her all the time either, not to mention the thought that his parents were asking him to die to save her, yet he did it anyway.

Such love, Paul points out in verse 8, fulfills God's law. So, when Christians fulfill our highest obligation to love, we also fulfill our other obligations as God's Word describes them. After all, love for God and love for our neighbor's lies at the very heart of God's commandments.

We, knowing our time is short, should show our love by leading what the Heidelberg Catechism calls "decent and chaste lives." Those who know our time is short also show our love for our neighbors by refraining from "belittling, insulting, hating or killing" them. Christians who know that our time is short feel the urgency of loving our neighbors by not stealing or even cheating or swindling them.

So quite simply, those who know our time is short view our neighbors through the lens of love. God's adopted children feel the urgency to both seek our neighbors' good and avoid doing what may harm them. In this way, those who know our time is short fulfill God's purposes for us.

Of course, as I've alluded before, this is never easy. No matter how hard we try to love the people around us, sometimes we get sidetracked. We easily become so busy leading our own lives that we don't think much about how to love the people around us.

And let's face it, sometimes the people we know make it very hard to love them, because of their words and actions. It's not always easy to love real people. I'll be honest, some don't always deserve our love. Others couldn't care less whether we love them. However, those who know our time is short remember how unattractive we are, by nature, to God. We certainly did nothing to deserve God's love. Yet as I mentioned before, while Christians are rebellious sinners, God sent God's only Son into our world to live and die for us.

So now we should seek to act in ways consistent with the way God views and treats us. In baptism Christians have been buried with Christ and raised to new life. God rips off the "clothing" that is any form of rebellion against God and God's purposes. God puts to death the stranglehold sin had on baptized believers and freed us to let Christ be our Master.

And when Christians rise from baptism's waters, we are "clothed" by the Spirit in Christ-like words, actions, and thoughts. We are called to hate what is evil and tenaciously cling to what is good because Christ hated what was evil and clung to what was good. Christians are called to do things like feed our hungry enemies and give them something to drink because that's the way Christ treated those who mistreated him.

Those who know that our time is short also should imitate Christ by refraining from certain immoral activities. We don't cave into the desires of our sinful nature because, even when Satan tempted him, Jesus resisted. Christians don't cave into the temptation to misuse our bodies because we seek to lovingly imitate Jesus Christ.

Many people when they find out they are near the end of something will decide to just let things go, do what they want, and drop all responsibility. Paul is saying just the opposite. We only have so much time, let's make the most of it and share God's love with the world. Amen