

Do You Know What Time It Is?
Romans 13:11-14
#65 in a Series on Paul's Letter to the Romans
Faith Community Church – April 29, 2007

Introduction

Several years ago I officiated at a burial over at Hillside Cemetery. It was a late spring Saturday morning, and I was riding with the funeral director who was going to drop me off at church. Across the street at the Roslyn School they were having a car wash, and as we pulled out of the cemetery lot, followed by the friends and family of the person who had passed away, the kids all ran to the edge of the road calling out “Get your car washed! Hey! Your car is dirty, come and let us wash it!”

It didn't bother me so much that the kids were behaving that way – they were kids. What bothered me was that their parents, who were standing nearby, made no effort to stop them. There is nothing wrong with soliciting customers. But it was not the right time.

It's an important thing to grasp what is going on around us. That is true socially and it is true spiritually. As Paul concludes this section of Romans, he ends by calling us to an awareness of the time in which we live. Do you know what time it is?

Read Romans 13:11-14.

Knowing the Time and What It Means

1. Understand the Time (13:11-12a)

When are we living?

Sometimes we will talk about an historical character and we will ask, “When did she live?” I want to ask that question about us. When are we living? What time are we living in?

When Paul talks about the time in verses 11-12, he is reminding us of where we stand in relation to the work of God in human history. Adam stood at the inception of human history. Moses stood near the beginning of the period of preparation for Messiah. You and I live in the Messianic age. This period that we live in, a period that began with the events of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection – is known by many names. Some call it the Church age, some call it the New Testament era, some use other names. But the Bible often refers to this period that we live in as the Last Days.

Scripture uses this term in two ways. Sometimes it uses it to refer to a short period of time that immediately precedes Jesus' return. But most often it is used to describe this whole era that began at the cross and is concluded by Jesus' return. That is why the Apostle John could write near the end of the 1st century, “Children, it is the last hour” but we can also say that we live in the last days.

While Paul does not use the term “last days” in this passage, he clearly had this in mind as he wrote this section.

How do we look at the time in which we live?

Paul is not content, though, in Romans 13, to leave us with just a reminder that we live in the last era of human history. He wants to impress us with the idea that *our* history is rapidly moving toward its conclusion – salvation is closer for us than when we first believed.

When Paul talks about salvation here, he is referring to the day when we ultimately receive the full salvation that God has promised. And the point is this – that day, whether it be through our death or through Jesus’ return – is one day closer than it was yesterday, and will be one day closer tomorrow than it was today. And I’d like to point out that if that was true in Paul’s day, over 1900 years ago, how much more true is it today?

2. *Understanding should produce a sense of urgency.*

What do we do with the knowledge that we live in a time when Christ’s return is closer? Let’s see what Paul says:

The call:

Look again at verse 11: “Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep.”

Most of you have had the experience of turning off the alarm clock to just stay in bed for a few more minutes before getting up. And then you suddenly realize that you’ve fallen asleep and that you are late – perhaps horribly late because you didn’t get up. That is what Paul is talking about. The alarm has gone off. The call is for us to get up!

The consistent biblical appeal:

It would be good to see what the Bible says about this in other places:

- Matthew 24:36-44
- 1 Thessalonians 5:1-6
- 1 Peter 4:7
- 2 Peter 3:1ff

The Bible teaches that the certainty of Jesus’ return, and the uncertainty of when it happens is something that God uses to motivate us to be faithful. That is why I think we need to talk about it more than we do. We need to be aware of the reality that one day we will give an account to God, and we don’t know how long we have before that happens.

Why the fuss?

I have been thinking a lot about the issue of motivation. Why do we need that? Why the fuss over being ready (and we'll define that in a few moments)? Let me share a few thoughts with you:

- We are too easily swallowed up in the view of life that our culture embraces, and forget the reason we're here.
- We need a reminder of our future accountability.
- We need a reminder that the reality of our faith is shown in how we approach following Christ. Look at Matthew 24:36 and note the ending of each of these parables. Do you see how someone who thought they were an insider ends up being an outsider? It is not that their lack of faithfulness makes them an outsider – it shows them for who they are. If you call yourself a Christian but don't care about following Christ, you should be concerned.

3. *Urgency naturally leads to action.*

When I use the word urgency I am not talking about emotion, I am talking about purpose or resolve that shows itself in the way we live. Read verses 12-14 again.

The first point he makes is in the second half of verse 12. We are to put off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.

I did a bit of research and came up with an interesting journal article. The authors of this article used crime figures from Albany, NY, in 2000 to research the question: when do most robberies take place? The answer is no surprise:

Between 5 AM and 5 PM	33.5% of robberies took place
Between 5 PM and 5 AM	66.5% of robberies took place ¹

Why? It isn't because the criminals finished their day jobs! Or that the kids are home from school! There is something about being in the darkness that makes us feel like we can't be seen. People do things at night that they wouldn't do during the day. Because of that, night was often used as a metaphor for evil. In Paul's day, *generally* the only people who were out at night were those who were doing wrong. Therefore he uses a common biblical metaphor or word-picture to make the point that wrong behavior is nighttime behavior – “works of darkness” – but we are of the day.

As a result, our lives should not be marked by behavior that is associated with darkness, but rather with daylight. I'm not sure that the church was characterized by the patterns he describes in verse 13, though it may be that he takes a bit of a shot at them with the last pair in light of what he going to be talking about in chapters 14 and 15.²

¹ http://www.forecastingprinciples.com/Conflicts/PDF%20files/Felson_and_Poulsen_Simple.pdf

² Moo: New International Commentary on the New Testament: Romans, page 825.

In order for this to be true, we have to put on Christ and not provide an opportunity for the flesh. What does it mean to put on Christ? This is another way of deliberately cultivating and pursuing Christian character and behavior (see Ephesians 4:17-5:21; Colossians 3:5-17). And because it is such a struggle, Paul tells us to make no provision for the flesh (that way of life outside of Christ). His point is that there are things that we simply can't mess with.

Look at the list in Colossians 3:5,8-9. What are we doing to stay away from things that will result in our behaving in these ways?

I read with interest one author's comments³ on this passage this week. His experiences seem to parallel mine. I came to Christ in a context where there were a lot of rules about what Christians couldn't do. Thirty years ago our spirituality was often judged by our behavior in some social choices. Christians didn't go to movies because of the language and sexual content. They didn't drink because of its association with excessive behavior. They didn't dance because dancing seemed to reflect a public sensuality that was inappropriate.

As time went on there was a reaction to this kind of thing. I'm not so sure that it so much of a matter of Christians wanting to do what everyone else did as it was – at least in part – a rejection of the idea that spirituality was a matter of keeping rules.

The fallout of that reaction though, is that almost anything goes today. And I'm not talking about our culture – I'm talking about the church. Think of it: there really is not much anymore about which one could say, "Christians don't do that."

The problem, says this author, is that we are asking the wrong question. When we ask "Can I do this?" we're really asking how close to the edge we can get. That is "making provision for the flesh." Instead we ought to be asking "Should I do this?" and have the answer to that question be influenced by the realization that as Christians our bodies (and that includes our minds) are the temple of the Spirit, that we have been bought with price and are to glorify God in our bodies (1 Cor. 6:19-20).

Responding to What God Says in This Passage

Back in 1969 the rock group Chicago had a big hit with a song that asked, "Does anyone really know what time it is? Does anyone really care?" Paul has told us what time it is and we need to care. His appeal is to realize that it is time to live consistently with what we profess. We can all commit to doing that to a greater degree, no matter what the condition of your spiritual life. The next thing on the horizon for us is standing before Jesus to give an account of how we have served him. Are you prepared for that moment?

If you've never trusted in Christ to forgive your sins, I urge you to do so today. For those outside of Christ the future holds a fearful judgment. Don't miss the opportunity. You do not know how long you have.

³ Moo: NIV Application Commentary, pages 444-45.