

Walk in Love and Light

Romans 13:8–14

How many of you remember what the old Avis car rental tagline used to be? Right! “We try harder.” For 50 years that was their tagline. Now, I have no idea how well they actually lived that out because I’m not sure if I’ve ever rented a car from them, but for a company, trying harder to serve their customers well is really a great thing. If I’m going to rent a car from you, I want you to try as hard as you can to get the rental right. Trying harder is a great approach to business, but it’s a horrible approach to the Christian life.



Unfortunately, I think this IS how we approach the Christian life at times. We struggle with anger or lust or greed or pride or any number of other issues and when we sin in that area yet again, we feel bad, we confess it and then we tell God that we are going to try harder next time. But then next time comes and we do it again. And so we say I’m going to try even harder next time. Trying harder is not a great approach to the Christian life.

In Romans 12:2, Paul says *do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed*. And so it is right that we have this sense of wanting these things to be different in our lives. This is our calling. Our lives are to be increasingly different. But Paul doesn’t finish that statement by saying “and so try harder.” No, he says *be transformed by the renewing of your mind*. And so while effort does need to be applied, it is not just about trying harder. The change really starts in the life of our mind. It’s about believing truth and living out of that truth.

In today’s passage Paul offers two truths that can help can help us think rightly about who we are in Christ. He is going to talk about love and he is going to talk about light. My hope for all of us today is that we can move away from a ‘just trying harder’ approach to a right thinking approach where we walk in love and light and see our lives transformed as a result.

And so let’s look first at love. Paul calls us to walk in love.

I. Walk in Love (v. 8-10)

⁸ *Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law.*

In verse 7 that we looked at last week, Paul made the statement that believers are to give to everyone what is due them. If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if you owe revenue, pay revenue; if respect, pay respect; if honor, pay honor. And so flowing out of that he says *Owe nothing to anyone*. Make sure you’ve paid off what you owe. *Except*, Paul says,

there is one debt that you should never considered paid in full and that is the continuing obligation to *love one another*.

Typically, the expression, *one another*, refers to fellow believers, but in this context Paul means anyone, because your *neighbor* can be either a believer or unbeliever. We have this obligation to love our neighbor and when we do that Paul says that we fulfill the law.

Now, Paul has made it clear in Romans that no one earns a right standing before God through obeying the law. In 3:20, Paul said, "*by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in [God's] sight.*" It is only through faith in Jesus that one has a right standing before God. Romans 3:28 he said, "*For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law.*" And so Paul is not talking here about how we have a right standing before God; he is talking about how we are to live now that we are Christians. And love fulfills the law.

Paul goes on to explain:

⁹ *For this, "YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY, YOU SHALL NOT MURDER, YOU SHALL NOT STEAL, YOU SHALL NOT COVET," and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying, "YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF."*

Paul lists four of the Ten Commandments here all of which relate to how we treat others. But he also adds, *and if there is any other commandment*, and of course there are other commandments. All of these commands, Paul says, *is summed up* by the principle, *'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'*

When Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment was he said that it was to love God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength. And then he said the second one is like it - you shall love your neighbor as yourself (Mark 12:31). In other words, Jesus was saying that you can sum up the law by saying that you shall love your neighbor as yourself. And so Paul is not saying anything new here. This is Jesus' teaching. If you love your neighbor, you will fulfill the law.

In verse 10, Paul states the negative form of this teaching. He says:

¹⁰ *Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.*

In 1 Corinthians 13, where Paul gives his classic description of love, he mostly describes it by stating the wrong things that love will not do: Love is not jealous, it does not brag, it is not arrogant; it does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own; it is not provoked; it does not take into account a wrong (vv. 4-5). Love does not do these wrong things. Since love does no wrong to a neighbor, love is the fulfillment of the law. Walk in love and you will do what the law demands.

Now, how is choosing to walk in love different than just trying harder? Well, if we understand Paul's theology of love we know that love comes from God. In Romans 5:5, Paul said that the love of God is poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit. And in Galatians 5:22, he says that love is the fruit of the Spirit. And so loving isn't about trying harder, it is about having a vital connection with God in which the life of the Spirit flows through our lives helping us to love. And so as you think about spiritual growth, don't make your focus be on all the things that you need to stop doing, rather make your focus trusting God to help you love people. Love fulfills the law.

Let me give you an example. Suppose the sins you really struggle with are sins of the tongue. There are ways that you use your words in a very unkind way at times. And so there is this person at work that irritates you. You don't like him. And so it is so easy when you are with other friends from work to talk about this person in ways that you know you shouldn't, but it just comes out. And then you go home and start thinking about that conversation and you feel horrible. You know it was wrong and you want to stop. And so over and over you make commitments to speak that way about this person. You vow to try harder, but it isn't helping.

What if you begin to think and pray about this growth area in terms of love and not just trying harder? And so when you struggle with your tongue, you don't just confess the improper speech, you confess that it is a failure to love. And you begin to ask God to grow the fruit of love in your life through the Spirit for this person. You ask Him to help you act in ways that are loving towards this person. And maybe you begin to pray for this person, that God would bless him. And over time, God renews your mind. Your heart is changed. Maybe this person still irritates you, but God has given you the capacity to love him and because of love you no longer have that desire to tear him down with your words.

Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.

As you think about the area you struggle with, whether it is anger or lust or pride or whatever, let me encourage you to begin processing that area through the lens of love. What would it look like to focus on love instead of just trying harder to not do the sinful behavior? Invite God to help you be renewed in your mind and to understand what it would look like to love in that area. Make love your focus because love fulfills the law. Walk in love!

Now, as we go on to verse 11, Paul offers another truth that can help us have a renewed mind and this has to do with our identity. In Christ, we belong to the day and so we are to walk in the light.

II. Walk in Light (vv. 11-14)

¹¹ 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 believed.

When he says, *do this*, he is making a connection made between our ability to love and our understanding of *the time*. Paul says that it is the *hour for you to awaken from sleep*. When you sleep you aren't very watchful and alert right? And so figuratively, now is the hour to awaken from any kind of spiritual inattentiveness. And the reason why is because *salvation is nearer to us than when we believed*.

When the Scriptures talk about *salvation* it can have a number of different senses. Salvation has a **past** aspect - we were saved from the penalty of our sin. It has a **present** aspect – we are being saved from the power of sin. But it also has a **future** aspect – there will be a day when we finally and fully will be delivered from the presence of sin. This future salvation is experienced at the return of Christ. This is the salvation that Paul is talking about here.

Paul doesn't say when this final aspect of salvation will be experienced. He simply says that it is *nearer to us than when we believed*. We don't know WHEN Jesus is returning; we just know THAT he is returning. And because of this, we should be awake. We should live with an attentive watchfulness.

In verse 12, Paul transitions from a metaphor of sleeping and waking to a metaphor of clothing. Paul says we must be dressed for the day.

¹² The night is almost gone, and the day is near. Therefore let us lay aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light.

We are to get “dressed” for the day, because *the day is near; the night is almost gone*. This is a calling to walk in the light. If we are going to walk in the light we need to lay aside our nightclothes. We are to *lay aside the deeds of darkness*. Darkness symbolizes evil and sin. And in their place we are to *put on the armor of light*.

The fact that he calls the clothing that belongs to the day, *armor*, suggests that we need to be prepared for spiritual conflict in this world. Since it is still night, there is a battle. We have enemies. The part of us called “the flesh” seeks to live in rebellion from God. We live in a world system that opposes God's ways. And, of course, the devil is constantly seeking to oppose the work of God in us. And so we need to put on the *armor of light*. And so, like Ephesians 6 says, we gird our loins with truth, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. Our feet we are prepared with the gospel of peace. We take up the shield of faith and the helmet of salvation. These are things that belong to the day.

Paul goes on in verse 13 to say:

¹³ Let us behave properly as in the day, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual promiscuity and sensuality, not in strife and jealousy.

To *behave properly* means to exhibit behavior that is fitting for who you are. In Christ, you are of the day. This is who you are. You do not belong to the night. And so behave properly and walk in the light. Don't do the stuff that belongs to the night – things like

carousing and drunkenness, sexual promiscuity and sensuality and strife and jealousy. Instead,

¹⁴ *But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts.*

Here Paul talks about one of our enemies, *the flesh*. Paul says to *make no provision* for it in terms of its lusts. To *make . . . provision* means that we give forethought to how we can satisfy the lusts of the flesh. Don't do that, he says, but rather *put on the Lord Jesus Christ*. Before, Paul talked about our clothing as the armor of light, but now he says that it is Jesus himself that we are to put on. We are to become conformed to the character of Christ. Back in 8:29, Paul said that those whom God foreknew, He also *predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son*. And so we have the hope that it is God's settled purpose to do this in us. We are cooperating with something that God is already doing.

And so when you back up and get the big picture of what Paul is saying in these four verses, he is talking about the time and he is talking about our identity. And these are truths that we need to allow to renew our minds.

In terms of the time, there is an urgency to the hour. It's time to wake up. Our final salvation is nearer than the day we believed. The night is almost gone. Day is near. Jesus is coming.

Most years Cindy takes a girl's trip with her sister, Kelly, and her best friend, Pam, from childhood. She is usually gone for five or six days. Now, I don't necessarily let the house get too messed up while she is gone, but let's just say it's probably not as clean as she keeps it. But you know what happens when I know she is coming back the next day? Things get a little cleaner. Things get vacuumed and swept. The bed gets made. Bathrooms cleaned. Things get straightened up. I'm motivated by her return. I want to have the house look in a way that will please her.

Now, here's the deal, I know the day that Cindy is coming back and so I can wait until the day before she returns to clean the house. But if I didn't know the exact day, I would keep it clean the whole time. There would be some urgency to the time.

Paul says that we don't know when Jesus is coming back, but we do know THAT he is coming back. The night is almost gone; the day is near. There is urgency to the time. And so when you think about that area of needed growth in your life, don't just try harder, be motivated by the truth that Jesus is coming back. See that struggle in light certainty that Jesus is coming and walk in the light.

Now, in terms of identity, if you are a believer in Jesus, you do not belong to the night, you belong to the day. You are a child of light. That is who you are! And so you can put on the armor of light and you can behave properly as in the day, because of your true identity in Christ.

Here's why this matters. Sometimes in our struggle against sin we can begin to believe that we will never be different. We try to change, but we fail and fail and fail. And eventually we can lose hope. We begin to believe that this sin is actually who I am and so we give up and quit trying. But the fact of the matter is you are a child of light! You belong to the day! That's your true identity in Christ!

Right now, we live in a time that is still "night." And because of that we have enemies and so it is always going to be a struggle in this life until Jesus returns. But you do not belong to the night. And your flesh and its desires is not who you are. You belong to the day. That is your destiny. You are a child of light. And so walk in the light.

And so, again, if you think about that struggle with your tongue, don't just try harder, let your mind be renewed by these truths. Spend time thinking about your struggle in light of these truths. How would you want to use your tongue if you knew Jesus was coming back tomorrow? Let that truth motivate you. And what use of your tongue makes sense in light of your true identity as a child of light? Reflect on these things. Count them as true and continue to fight the battle day after day. Don't give up. Keep seeking to walk in the light.

Trying harder is a horrible approach to the Christian life. But let me clarify that statement a bit, because I'm not saying that we don't need to apply effort. We do. This is clearly implied when Paul says things like *put on the Lord Jesus Christ*. We are to do something.

What I am saying, however, is that if our minds are not being renewed, then just trying harder is not going to work. Paul says that we are transformed by the renewing of our minds. And Paul presents a couple of truths here that can help us be renewed in our minds. Love fulfills the demands of the law. So apply effort to love. Walk in love. And you belong to the day. That is your destiny. And so apply effort to put on the armor of light. Put on Christ. You can because you are a child of light. So walk in the light.

Walk in love. Walk in light. Amen.