

**“The Gospel in a Nutshell”**

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**Romans 13:8-11** Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. **9** The 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.” **10** Love 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; **12** the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; **13** let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. **14** Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

**LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR**

When I have a confirmation class, I make them memorize the ten commandments.

But, after reading today’s lesson I’ve decided to make it easier on my next class.

I’m going to have them memorize just one sentence from today’s lesson.

“Love your neighbor as yourself.”

If they can remember that and put it into practice, they have learned the essence of the law.

I’m not into tattoos, but if I were this sentence would make a good tattoo.

“Love your neighbor as yourself.”

Except maybe we should put the tattoo on upside down!

We should tape this message to our computers and our cell phones.

It would make a wonderful yard sign.

We should frame it and put it in our homes.

“Love your neighbor as yourself.”

If we can just learn this one message, everything else will fall into place.

The ancient Israelites had these little leather boxes that they strapped to their head.

Inside was Scripture reminding them to love God.

They also put Scripture boxes over their doorways so that every time they went into their homes and every time they left they saw it.

Why did they do that?

The ancient Israelites had terrific memories.

They learned great portions of Scripture by heart.

They didn't need a cheat sheet

... especially when it came to Scripture that was so familiar.

It wasn't about knowledge.

It was about practice.

They were God's people.

And for that reason, they were called to live in a different way way.

Those traditions reminded them of that on a daily basis.

The gospel is not hard to understand.

Love you neighbor just about covers it.

That's the gospel in a nutshell.

It's just that easy .... and just that hard.

LOVE GOD

Now some of you might say that we need another sentence.

It's not just about loving neighbor.

It's also about loving God.

I'd be hard pressed to disagree with you.

After all Jesus said that there are two commands that we need to follow.

Rule 1 ... Love God.

Rule 2 ... Love neighbor.

The rest is just commentary.

But, the apostle John makes an interesting point in one of his letters.  
He said, "No one has ever seen God; ...."

But we have seen our neighbor.

So ..... if you want to love God you love your neighbor.

He wrote, "if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us." (1 John 4:12)

This is important.

Often we say that we love God.

But, sometimes that love is just in our head and not in their heart.

How can we tell?

Jesus said that we can tell by what we do.

We are known by our fruits.

When we do things that are un-neighborly in the name of God ...  
God is not in it.

We evaluate the sincerity our faith by how we act toward our neighbor.  
And when we connect with our neighbor, we connect with God.

When we treat our neighbor with compassion and kindness ...  
When we love our neighbor .... God is in our heart.

We are not only loving our neighbor.

We are also loving God.

## THE CHURCH

The church gives us a place where we can put this way of life into practice.

On our own we can't love our neighbor.  
We can't love and forgive the way God in Christ does.

But, the Bible tells us that in the community of faith  
... through the power of the Spirit ...  
this love becomes a possibility.

We bear one another's burdens.  
We forgive one another and gently seek to restore those who are broken by  
life.  
In the church God's love becomes incarnate  
... flesh and blood ... real.

In Houston representatives from the Presbyterian Disaster Fund visited every Presbyterian Church and asked for the names of church members who had experienced flood damage and needed help getting the wet stuff out.

They took the list and helped everyone on it begin the restoration process.

I'm sure the church members appreciated the help.  
But, more than that, I think that through this work they experienced God's love in a very practical, down to earth way. And I would say that the folks working for Presbyterian Disaster Assistance felt the same sense of spiritual connection.

Last week I wrote in my "virtual sermon" that when the storm came Jesus said,  
"Peace. Be still."

And the storm was quiet.

When the storm comes to our life, Jesus still says "peace, be still."

And how does he say it?  
He says it through the voice and the actions of the church, the Body of Christ.

Love is more than a feeling.  
Love is more than an inward attitude.

Love is our life together.  
Love is the grace of God in human form.

Paul wrote in his letter to the Corinthians that we can't do it alone.  
None of us are self-sufficient.  
But, on the other hand, we all have a part to play in this ministry.

We are ... all of us ... the body of Christ ...  
and each one of us is a part of that body.  
(1 Corinthians 12:28)

In the church, we refuse to leave any one behind.  
And we seek to bring those who are divided together.

Paul wrote in his second letter to the Corinthians that we have been given  
the ministry of reconciliation. In Jesus Christ we are forgiven.

And we've been given the job of bringing this message, in word and in  
deed to the world.  
(2 Corinthians 5:18-19)

The Princeton Proposal for Christian Unity put it this way:  
"God gathers his people ... to bring unity to a divided humanity.  
If we accept division from other Christians as normal or inevitable, we turn  
away from the mission God has given us."

## GOD'S TIME

The second half of our lesson lends urgency to this ministry of reconcilia-  
tion.  
Paul writes, "You know what time it is."  
Do you know what time it is?

Paul is talking about God's time  
... the right time for the coming of salvation.

Whenever I read these passages in the Bible that talk about time, I'm re-  
minded of an old rock and roll song. That song took a completely different  
attitude toward time.

The band Chicago sang,  
“Does anybody really know what time it is?  
Does anybody really care?”

I was a high school student when that song came out, and it really fit my mood back then.

I had no clue about who I was or what I was going to do.

I had no idea what time it was ...  
and to be honest ... most of the time I really didn't care.

Christians are NOT called to live aimless, uncaring lives.

For us the time is now.  
Life is not just one thing after another.  
Life has meaning and purpose.

For those of you who have punched a time clock, you understand what it means to be “on the clock.” In other words, you're at work, and you have a job to do.

Christians are on the clock.  
And God has given us a job to do.

Paul wrote that it's time for us to “wake up”.

The alarm clock is blaring.  
No more sleepy Christians.  
God's salvation time is closer than you think.

## LIGHT AND DARK

So how can we live as wide awake Christians instead of sleepyheads?  
It's a matter of light.

I remember having a hard time getting out of bed and going to school or work.

Do you know what my father finally did to get me up?

He let in the light.

He opened up the blinds, the light came flooding in, and I was awake ... ready or not!

Paul uses this light image to describe actions that are in line with our identity in Christ Jesus.

When I would go out at night as a teen my Dad would simply say, "Remember who you are."

He knew that teenagers often made bad decisions under the cover of darkness.

And so he appealed to my identity.  
I had been taught right from wrong.  
That was who I was.

And ... most of the time ... that was enough.

These days I no longer stay out late.  
For one thing I'm too old for that.  
But, also, with maturity comes different priorities.

There's a similar process when it comes to our life in Christ.  
We are encouraged in the Bible to grow up  
... and grow into our identity as children of God.

We live in the light, the light of God's salvation in Christ Jesus.  
We live in the light of forgiveness.  
And it's the light that encourages us to love our neighbor as ourselves.

More than that, this light excludes those deeds that are done under the cover of darkness.

Paul gives us an abbreviated list:  
... drunkenness, immorality of all kinds, quarreling ... jealousy.

If you've ever watched that TV show, "Cops", you get the picture. That shows proves the old saying, "Nothing good happens after midnight."

In this passage, darkness is a metaphor for sin.  
Sin seeks the cover of darkness.  
Sin seeks to obscure the truth from everyone ... even from ourselves.

To put it another way, sin is the ultimate purveyor of fake news.

But, we are people of the light.

We are people who even dare to seek the truth.

We “fact check” the claims of the world over against the teaching of God’s Word in Christ Jesus.

We dare to even learn the hard truth about our own sinfulness, our own brokenness

... because we live in the glorious light of God’s forgiveness.

## LIGHT STRONGER THAN DARKNESS

A few weeks ago folks in some parts of the country experienced a relatively rare event ... a total solar eclipse. My cousin in South Carolina said it got as dark as night.

Streetlights activated.

I’m told that cattle began to bed down for the night.

But, once it got light again after two and half minutes the herd looked around oddly ... as if it had been the shortest night they had ever experienced.

The cows were confused, but most people were not.

The people knew what was happening.

They knew what time it was.

And this is Paul’s point.

We know what time it is.

We live in the light of God’s forgiveness.

We’re not cows.

We’re the people of God.

And so we act accordingly.

We do not lose hope.

We do not succumb to those activities born of guilt and despair

... because we know the morning, God’s morning is coming soon.

We believe the light of God, the love of God is stronger than the darkness.

In our area there was only a partial eclipse of the sun.

And so we couldn't look at the eclipse without special glasses.  
It turns out that even 10 or 15% of the sun's light is a whole lot of light.

And in the same way, no amount of darkness can overcome the power of God's love in Christ Jesus. The light of God is just too strong for the darkness.

There can never be a total eclipse of God's Son.

When Jesus was crucified, the Bible tells us that for a time the world turned dark.

The disciples thought all was lost and ran away.  
Jesus was crucified, dead and buried.

He was sealed in the tomb.

A heavy stone was rolled across the entrance to that tomb.  
They said the stone was too heavy to be rolled away.

But, on the first day of the week, just before dawn, some women came to the tomb.

Much to their surprise, they found that this heavy stone had already been rolled away.

And on that day the rising sun shone more brightly than ever.

From that day forward, the truth began to dawn on the disciples.  
Even the darkest night was no match for the light of God's salvation.

## PUTTING ON CHRIST

The church is charged to be the keeper of this light.  
As God in Christ has first loved us, so we are to love one another.

Unlike Christ's love, our love is imperfect.

But, we don't let that discourage us.

As the saying goes, “The perfect should not be the enemy of the good.”

We do what we can do today because we know what time it is.  
We see a new day coming.

We light the candle of love to puncture the darkness of the night.

Paul likens this to putting on a new set of clothes.  
He encourages us to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ”.

When everyone else is sowing the seeds of hate and distrust, we are called to put on the garb of love and forgiveness.

When everyone else is giving full voice to their anger, we are called to remember that a soft answer turns away wrath. (Proverbs 15:1)

They say that clothes make the man.  
(And I assume that clothes makes the woman as well.)

I don't know if that's true.  
But, this I do know.

When we put on the Lord Jesus Christ ... when adopt his ways instead of the world's ways ... we become different people. It makes us.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus spells out the difference using this formula:

“You have heard it said ... but I say to you” (Matthew 5:21-48)

For example, “You have heard it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But, I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you ...”  
(Matthew 5:43-44)

That's part of what it means to put on the Lord Jesus Christ.

No, don't misunderstand.  
You won't feel like doing this.  
But, it's amazing how doing the right thing can change a person from the outside in.

Remember when you were little and played dress up?  
I used to dress up like a cowboy.  
I imagined myself to be a lawman in the old west.

It was fun.  
But, of course it wasn't true.  
I was just a little boy playing the role of a cowboy.

What's that they say about people who act the role of the cowboy and yet  
have no skills?  
All hat and no cow?

God calls us to do more than just play the role of a Christian.

We are called to put on Christ.  
We are called to become conformed and transformed by the role that we  
play.

And in this way we become God's light in the darkness.

Have you ever gone to a really fancy party or maybe a dance?  
I have. Do you wait to the last minute to get ready?

Probably not. You buy your tuxedo or fancy dress days in advance.  
You start getting ready well before the big event is to start.

Maybe your spouse even says,  
"Wow, you look great tonight."

Sometimes I think preparing for and anticipating the big event is just as  
much fun as the event itself.

This is the feeling we should get as disciple of Christ.  
We are getting ready for the big event.  
The time is now.

And so we put on the love of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

Why? Because we don't want to miss that party!  
This is going to be the biggest party ever.

People will come from all over ...  
from the North, the South, the East and the West.

So friends ... it's time to get dressed up.  
Put on the Lord Jesus Christ.  
And love your neighbor.  
That's the gospel ... in a nutshell.