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## A Wake Up Call

a sermon on Romans 13.11-14

by David C. Mauldin

Westminster Presbyterian Church, Mobile, Alabama

Our sermon begins with the story of a thoroughly modern man. His mother was a Christian. His father was a pagan. And he ... well, he was just trying to find his way in the world. He came from a hard-working but upwardly mobile family, and he received a decent education. He partied a bit too much as a student. In his social world that was expected. Before long, however, he fell in love. He and his girlfriend moved in together. Eventually they had a child. He was faithful to her through the twelve years they were together, though things ended badly, as you will hear in a moment.

Meanwhile, his career began to take off. He became a professor. His intellect and natural talent were obvious. This guy was going places. He liked sports. He enjoyed the theater. What mattered most to him were his friends. He tried religion. He felt sure that Christianity wasn't the answer. He got involved with a religious group, and stayed with them for a number of years. They were basically of a cult. Eventually he became convinced they were full of hot air. They put on a good performance and spoke eloquently, but in the end they had no substance whatsoever. Our friend wanted substance. Along the way he dabbled in horoscopes and astrology. He looked to science and philosophy. Happiness and peace of mind continually eluded him.

He was turned inside out when a friend he had known since grade school died. They had been close, and this death left a deep wound. Sometime after this he moved to a more prestigious place to teach. His students did not take their studies seriously enough, in his opinion, so he moved to a place with a better quality of life and better students. Our friend was a social climber. He wanted to run in the best circles. He craved success and fame. That was what eventually came between him and his girlfriend. She was not from "society," and he realized he needed a wife who was. He found a suitable prospect (a girl with money), and when he announced his engagement, his girlfriend left him. He grieved, but business is business, after all.

In his new home, he struck up a friendship with a prominent pastor. This pastor had a well-deserved reputation as a preacher. Our friend didn't care about Christianity. He just wanted to hear the famous preacher speak! You can see where this is going. The preacher removed all the obstacles he had to faith. His intellectual objections and doubts were answered. So he began taking classes at the church toward membership.

Yet he still did not have a relationship with Christ. He was still devoted to fame, money, and status. He was still quite selfish.

One day as he was walking along, he saw a homeless beggar. The beggar was drunk, and he was laughing and enjoying himself. Our friend was struck: “Here is this homeless beggar who has nothing, and he is happy. I have everything I’ve ever wanted, and I’m not happy. Why is that?”

He was successful, but his soul was in torment. He was looking for answers. He was seeking truth, and how to best live – how to really *live*.

One day – he was 31 years old – as he meditated on the troubles of his soul, he began crying, and he went outside so his friends wouldn’t hear him. He sat down under a tree and cried and prayed. In that moment, he heard a sound. It sounded like children singing, as if they were playing some kind of game, but it was no game he had ever heard of. They were chanting, “Take up and read! Take up and read!” He decided this was a sign. He ran back inside, grabbed his Bible, opened it, and read the first verse he saw: “Let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.” He read the last two verses of our scripture reading! And that was the decisive moment of his life.

He not only became a Christian, he became a church leader. But not just any church leader! He became the greatest theologian the world has known since the apostle Paul. He is, of course, Saint Augustine. Striking, isn’t it, how thoroughly modern he was for a person who lived in the fourth century! The things he cared about, the questions he had, and the places he looked for answers are still the same, aren’t they? His temptations and decisions, his joys and sorrows, are familiar to us. The way of life he chose – his career, friends, social climbing, enjoying himself, and intellectual stimulation – most people in our society are trying to follow that path. Augustine was living the American dream long before America existed. What did our scripture reading tell him, and what does it tell us?

This little passage actually concludes the portion of Paul’s letter to the Romans that begins with last Sunday’s scripture reading. I told you then that Paul had written about God’s righteousness, human sin, grace, our adoption as God’s children, and even Israel; and finally he came to the question, “So what?” Romans 12.1-2 begins to answer the “so what?” question. Our reading today is not the last thing Paul has to say, but it does round out a major section of the letter.

We get a clue what our reading is about by looking at what he wrote between last week’s passage and today’s. He talks about getting along together in the church, about persecution and how Christians should not fight evil with evil, we should overcome evil with good. He talks about secular authorities – the Roman state. He is not babbling

randomly. He knows the Christians in Rome are in for a rough ride. They have their hands full just getting along. Some are Jews; some are gentiles. Some are rich; some are poor. The church in Rome was diverse in many ways. Living out their unity was challenge enough, *but* on top of that they were a despised minority and in danger of persecution. Not long after Paul sent this letter, in fact, the persecution got bad. So Paul knows these Christians need encouragement. They need motivation to hang tough. He wanted them to keep the faith, no matter what, so he included today's passage.

Some people mix metaphors. Paul put them into a blender. This passage is not quite as bad as 1 Thessalonians 5, "where those who are asleep will go into labor pains, because a thief is breaking into the house, while those who are awake should not get drunk, but put on their armor" [Wright, Romans, p. 728]. But this passage is almost as bad. Here it is time to wake up, because night is nearly over and day is near, so we should lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. We are also told to put on Christ. The surprising thing is how easy this is to understand, despite the jumble of images.

The key to the passage is the twin image of night vs. day and darkness vs. light. Night and darkness represent a way of life. Call it sin. Call it brokenness. Call it not-God's-will. Light and day represent holiness, peace, blessing, and fellowship with God. That part is easy. Night equals sin. Day equals God.

The next part is a bit trickier, so pay close attention. These words—night and day—can describe two things. One is the times we live in, and the other is how we live our lives. One is the times, the other is our lifestyle. Got it? Here is how it works: We live in a world dominated by sin and brokenness. If you don't know what that means, read a newspaper. The world is a mess. Human beings do terrible things to one another. The good news is: God does not intend for things to be this way, and he's going to do something about it. Right now we are living in the night, but day is coming! Day is coming when God will judge the world, make all things new, and establish his kingdom of love and goodness.

This is what Paul is talking about when he says, "You know what time it is." The truth is, we are not living in the middle of the night. We are living at the end of it. If you have ever been up before dawn to see the sun rise, there is a moment when you see that first hint of light. The sun is not up yet, but it is just over the horizon. You can't exactly see the sun, but you perceive a faint hint of light ready to break forth over the land. Jesus resurrection functions in history as that first hint of light on the horizon. God promised an end to the night. He promised a bright new day. When the Father raised Jesus from the dead ... pow! The first rays tore through the night to announce God's new day is almost here!

So this language about night and day can refer to the times we are living in. We live in an age of sin and brokenness, but it's not permanent. Night and day can also refer to *how* we live. This concept isn't hard to grasp. Night describes a selfish lifestyle. Paul mentions drunkenness and debauchery alongside quarreling and jealousy. Living for pleasure. Living for me. That's night. Day describes a life of love, integrity, hard work—a life lived for God and in service of others. We get that.

Paul uses these two layers of meaning together to make his point. We know what time it is. Night is almost over. God's new day is almost here. Already the first hint of light is on the horizon. So it's time to wake up! Because God's new day is coming, it doesn't make sense to live a night-time lifestyle. We need to wake up. Quit living casual lives. Get out of bed, and put on Christ.

Putting on Christ means basically the same thing as "offer your body as a living sacrifice." It's time to do those things, and do them with a sense of urgency. It's time to be passionate about God, to get serious about honoring God in all that we do. God's new day is coming. Christ himself will bring it. ...

I'm wearing purple today. That's a sign that we have entered the season of Advent. Advent is a four week period when we get ready for the coming of Christ. We look back to his first coming. Christmas is about that. Advent also looks ahead, however, to Christ's second coming. Yes, Presbyterians believe in Christ's second coming. All Christians do. We say it every week, "from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead." We don't get worked up with a lot of end-times speculation the way some churches do, but of course we believe Christ will come again. We have to. His work isn't finished yet. He has promised to make all things new.

Some people might wonder if it makes sense to continue hoping Christ will return. After all, it has been nearly 2,000 years. Sure, God left the children of Israel in Egypt for 400 years, and the distance between King David and the birth of Jesus was 1,000 years. So we know God takes his time. But, c'mon? Two thousand years? Can we really keep hoping after all this time? We can and we must. God keeps his promises. His mighty acts of salvation recorded in the Bible—such as sending Jesus and raising him from the dead—convince us of that. Not to mention the many ways we have experienced God's faithfulness in our own lives. He has promised. He will deliver. Christ will at last finish his work. We should not despair, because we know that God does not perceive time as we do. A long time to us is a short time for him, and we do not know all his plans and purposes. We have to trust him. When we think about the second coming, what matters is not the when. What matters is who and what. The who is Jesus—the same Jesus who died and rose again will return. The what is new creation—when he comes he will set things right.

You probably noticed that our scripture reading does not mention the second coming explicitly, but it really is about second coming hope. And second coming hope does two things for us. On one hand, it comforts us. We need comfort. In a night-time world, bad things happen. We hurt the people we love, and they hurt us. We break our backs and our minds chasing our dreams; then we see a beggar who is happy, and we realize we aren't. War, poverty, hunger, abuse – they happen in a night-time world. In order to survive, we need the comfort and assurance Christ gives us when he promises a better day.

On the other hand, hope inspires us to action. If a new day is coming, then we can take a stand without being afraid. The powers of evil have their days numbered. A new day is coming – Christ is coming – so who cares what they do to me today? I can take a stand. This kind of freedom has produced martyrs and revolutions. It ended slavery in Christian nations. It overthrew tyranny and marched for justice. Jesus is Lord, so Christians do not have to be afraid of anyone or anything. We can stand up for truth and justice. No matter what happens in the short run, we know that in the long run, good wins, because Jesus is coming again to make it happen.

Hope for God's new day gives both comfort and courage. And we can't do without either one. If we only had comfort, our faith would become the opiate of the masses. We would salve our wounds and wait for heaven and put up with all kinds of evil and injustice. Or worse, we might comfort ourselves but not help our neighbor in distress because we were afraid. We need hope to spur us to action. At the same time, we need hope to comfort us. We need it to hold heaven before our eyes. Otherwise, our action might get carried away. We might decide the ends justify the means. We might commit more evil in our zeal to bring about good. Hope in Jesus' second coming provides the hope and comfort we need to make it through life and do good along the way.

I said hope does these two things for us, but I should add a third based on our passage: Second-coming hope wakes us up. We can no longer live casual lives. A life of work and play, a measure of success, good times with family and friends – they aren't enough. Not that there is anything wrong with these things. They're fine. But they are not enough to make us happy, to fulfill us. Instead we burn with a passion for God, an insatiable appetite to know him and love him.

Augustine was blessed with a spiritual hunger. It kept gnawing at him, even when things were going well for him. He saw through the charade to the emptiness of life as he knew it. His eyes were open just enough to figure out something was wrong. When he passed the happy beggar, he didn't think, "How revolting!" Instead he reflected on the fact that the drunk was happy and he was not, yet he would never trade places with the drunk. He had his friends, education, and career, all of which were supposed to

make him happy, but they didn't. And why not? Augustine had a spiritual hunger, and that was grace. It was God's gift, through which God called him home.

Augustine was a light sleeper. Some people are light sleepers and some are heavy sleepers, spiritually speaking. Christians should be wide awake. Hear how Augustine described how God woke him up and the passion he found for God. He's addressing God here:

Late have I loved you, beauty so old and so new: Late have I loved you. And see, you were within and I was in the external world and sought you there, and in my unlovely state I plunged into those lovely created things which you made. You were with me, and I was not with you. The lovely things kept me far from you, though if they did not have their existence in you, they had no existence at all. You called and cried out loud and shattered my deafness. You were radiant and resplendent, you put to flight my blindness. You were fragrant, and I drew in my breath and now pant after you. I tasted you, and I feel but hunger and thirst for you. You touched me, and I am set on fire to attain the peace which is yours.

This is God's Word to you: His new day is coming! You cannot live a casual life. Will you burn with passion for Christ? Or will you sleep on ... until it is too late? Amen.

rev\_mauldin@yahoo.com