

PUT ON THE ARMOR OF LIGHT

Romans 13:1-14

Key Verse: 13:12

“The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light.”

Thus far, we have learned how God is merciful toward sinners. We were enemies of God and under his judgment. Out of his great mercy, God demonstrated his love by sending his one and only Son Jesus as our Savior. Through faith in Jesus, we are saved from eternal condemnation. We have become God’s beloved children who inherit his glorious kingdom. With the hope of future glory, we live in this world. How? Paul began his practical teaching by urging us in 12:1-2 to offer our bodies as living sacrifices to God, with minds renewed by the Holy Spirit. Then he spent the rest of chapter 12 instructing us how to live out our faith in the church. Now, in chapter 13, he turns to how we live out our faith in the world. We Christians have a dual citizenship: We are citizens of our Father’s heavenly kingdom (Php 3:20), and of the nation where we live. Though our true citizenship is in heaven, we cannot ignore the reality of living in this world. We encounter governing authorities and neighbors. Paul teaches us how to interact with them. His point is not that we would somehow survive until Jesus comes again. It is to become the agents of change who bring about the transformation of the world. As we are transformed, we transform the world. In doing so, our real battle is not against flesh and blood, but against the evil forces of darkness (Eph 6:12). We cannot win this battle with mere human effort or means. We need to put on the armor of light. And we need to follow God’s rules of engagement as we live in the world. Let’s learn how to do so.

First, submit to the governing authorities (1-7). Paul wrote this letter to Christians living in the Roman Empire. Since they confessed Jesus as their Lord, it may have been tempting to ignore the Roman government, or even oppose it. But Paul said, **“Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities...”** (1a). This is the general principle that Christians should hold

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toward governing authorities. Our basic attitude should be submission, not rebellion. But, in reality, fallen people have a rebellious spirit and dislike governing authorities. This rebellious spirit is often the motive for resistance. But Paul said, “**...be subject to the governing authorities.**”

When we hear these words, we immediately remember all the injustices inherent among the governing authorities. So, it is hard to accept this teaching. Though some governments follow the rule of law, others do not. Cruel dictators exercise their authority arbitrarily and oppress people. Should we submit to such rulers? That’s the million-dollar question. The Christian pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer opposed the Nazi regime and even tried to assassinate Hitler. But he was discovered and executed. Was he right? This is a billion-dollar question. We cannot deal thoroughly with this controversial issue in this message. Rather, we need to grasp the main point of Paul’s teaching. A Christian’s basic attitude should be to submit to the governing authorities, not rebel against them. It is because they are under God’s sovereign rule. To submit to the authorities reflects our submission to God. Apostle Peter exhorts us to submit ourselves “**for the Lord’s sake**” (1Pe 2:13).

Though the Bible teaching is so clear, still, it is not easy to practice. How can we? Even in this hard teaching, we need to follow Jesus’ footsteps. While on earth, Jesus did not oppose the governing authorities. Jesus was tried unjustly before the Roman governor Pilate. As Jesus remained silent, Pilate said, “**Don’t you realize that I have power either to free you or to crucify you?**” Jesus answered, “**You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above**” (Jn 19:10-11). Jesus submitted to the governing authority. Yet his submission was not merely to them, but to God, for world salvation. In this way Jesus became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him (Heb 5:9). When we struggle to submit to the authorities, we can imitate Jesus and grow spiritually.

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Although submitting to the governing authorities should be our basic attitude, there is an exception. It is when the governing authorities demand the loyalty which only God deserves. Then we have to resist them as a matter of life and death. We can see a good example in the apostles. Generally, they submitted to the governing authorities. But when the Sanhedrin ordered them not to speak in Jesus' name, they replied, **"We must obey God rather than human beings!"** (Ac 5:29) In our times, there is growing government pressure to deny the Creator God and Christian values in favor of moral permissiveness. Some governing authorities act like they are in the place of God. As we confront this reality, we must obey God as a matter of life and death, standing on the gospel truth.

Though we should exercise discernment, our basic attitude should be to submit to the governing authorities. Why? Paul says, **"...there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God"** (1b). God is the sovereign Ruler of the nations and of human history. It seems that political leaders have power to control everything. But that is not true. Superseding all the powers of this world is the mighty power of God. In Daniel's time it seemed that Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, ruled the world. But in truth, God held him in his hand. When Nebuchadnezzar became extremely proud, worshiping himself, God turned him into an animal-like person for seven years. God's purpose was, **"...so that the living may know that the Most High is sovereign over all the kingdoms on earth and gives them to anyone he wishes and sets over them the lowliest of people"** (Da 4:17). Sometimes we wonder what is going on in the world. One thing we should know is that God rules the world according to his sovereign will. All authority belongs to God. So, generally, to rebel against the authorities is to rebel against what God has established and will result in his judgment (2).

In verses 3-7 Paul describes civil governments as servants of God, and tells how Christians should live under them. Generally, civil governments commend those who do right and bring punishment on wrongdoers as God's

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agents of wrath (3-4). We need law enforcement officers. Without them, evil would run rampant and the world would be chaotic. Most law enforcement officers, like Rich Ryzewski, try extremely hard to be fair and compassionate. Their task is very challenging, and we should pray for them. What a great service first-responders provide in times of crisis! However, they should exercise their power justly, recognizing their authority comes from God. Recently a Chicago police officer was found guilty of second-degree murder for shooting a young African American teenager in 2014. After the verdict was announced, advocates for the victim wept and publicly gave thanks to Almighty God for answering their prayers. This reveals that God is sovereign over civil government. God himself polices the police. As for citizens, if we want to be free from fear of the one in authority we should do what is right. For example, following the speed limit while driving is the law. Yet we sometimes find ourselves speeding. Then, when we see a police car we become scared, and feel guilty. However, if we always observe the speed limit, we don't need to be afraid. We should observe the laws not only because of possible punishment, but as a matter of conscience (5). When our conscience is stricken, we know that we are wrong in the sight of God. The authorities cannot catch every wrongdoer, but God sees everything. So we should live before God to have a clear conscience, like Paul (Ac 24:16).

Verses 6-7 list the practical ways we submit to governing authorities. Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor. We should fulfill our duties as a citizen of the nation where we live. If believers evade paying taxes, or rebel against civil authorities, this discredits the gospel message. Then, even though they speak wonderfully, no one will listen to them. But if we do all our duties, we gain credibility that enhances our gospel witness. Doing good is an essential part of effective evangelism. This is the deeper reason for submitting to authorities and living as good citizens. We have every reason to believe that the Christians in Rome took Paul's words to heart. They lived as good citizens in the Empire for the glory of God. As time passed, their influence spread greatly. When Roman noblemen sought wives

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for their sons, they favored Christian women because they were known to be pure, loving and diligent. When plagues came upon Roman cities, many of the civil leaders fled for their own safety. But Christians stayed behind to care for the sick and keep the city working. They were highly regarded for their sacrificial lives and faithfulness. In this way, Christianity influenced the entire Roman Empire. When we live as good citizens for the glory of God, we too can become a source of good influence for the transformation of our society.

Second, love your neighbor as yourself (8-10). We usually recognize the importance of loving other believers. But it is easy to be indifferent toward neighbors who do not attend our church. In this part, Paul emphasizes loving our neighbors. Verse 8 says, **“Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law.”** As we live among neighbors, we help each other in many ways: sharing lawn care equipment, shoveling each other’s snowy sidewalks, and watching each other’s houses when we are away. When we need help, we are usually humble and kind. But after getting what we need, it is easy to take it for granted. This sours relationships between neighbors. So, we should be careful to repay everything that we owe and be thankful. It is even better to not owe anything at all. But there is one debt that is continuing: It is to love one another. This love is God’s love, that is unconditional and sacrificial. It seeks the benefit of others and is concerned about their well-being. It serves them free of charge, without expecting any reward.

How is it possible to practice this love? When we remember how God forgives and loves us, we can love others with God’s love. This fulfills the law. In verse 9 Paul quotes among the Ten Commandments those related to loving neighbors: **“You shall not commit adultery,” “You shall not murder,” “You shall not steal,” “You shall not covet.”** The sins of adultery, murder, theft and covetousness are widespread and bring tremendous damage and pain to any society. These sins wound and destroy people’s personalities and break relationships. Last week I heard the testimonies of many women athletes who were sexually abused by a doctor at

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Michigan State University. Though he was found guilty and put in prison, the young women's lives are forever scarred. Sin like this is what makes our society so terrible. Governing authorities cannot really solve sin problems. But God's love brings forgiveness, healing and reconciliation. God's love alone can bring real restoration. When we practice God's love we live on a higher level than human law. That's why Paul says that the commandments are summed up in one command: **"Love your neighbor as yourself."** Love does no harm to a neighbor. Loving our neighbors may seem to be a small thing. But the impact is greater than we realize. It is like the ripple effect of one stone on a body of water. God's love percolates and overflows like a spring of water. The more we try to love others, the deeper our love becomes and the more abundant our lives are. When we practice God's love toward our neighbors, they return love to us. Love begins to flow in the society and transforms it.

Third, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ (11-14). In verses 11-14 Paul shares the motivation for godly living. Verse 11 says, **"And do this, understanding the present time: The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed."** Loving our neighbors is urgent. We need to do so understanding the present time. Here, **"time"** does not simply refer to the times we live in but denotes the coming of a specific event. That is the second coming of Jesus. History is not a continuous series of repetitive cycles. It is linear with a beginning and an end. Jesus said, **"I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End"** (Rev 22:13). Jesus will come soon. We don't know when. But one thing is clear: it is time to wake up from our slumber; it is time for spiritual vigilance and diligence. With each day that passes, Jesus' second coming is nearer and nearer. At the same time, we are getting older, and the time to leave this world draws closer. That is why we need to wake up from our slumber. When we sleep, we fall into an unconscious state. Likewise, when we slumber spiritually, we lose cognizance of Jesus' second coming. We fall into the worldly mindset that this present age will go on forever. We lose the sense of spiritual urgency and

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seek to enjoy small pleasures. When we understand the present time, we can wake up. Jesus said repeatedly, **“Keep watch,”** and **“Watch out”** (Mt 24:42; 25:13; Mk 13:5). Paul says in Ephesians 5:14, **“This is why it is said: ‘Wake up, sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.’”** **“The night is nearly over; the day is almost here”** (12a). Here, **“the night”** refers to the dominion of darkness. **“The day”** refers to Jesus’ coming again. When he comes, the darkness will end. Sinners love the darkness instead of the light because their deeds are evil (Jn 3:19). They try to hide their sins. But when the day comes, there will be no hiding place. Everything will be exposed before the light. So, what should we do?

Paul exhorts us both negatively and positively. In verse 12b he says, **“So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light.”** Christian life is a spiritual battle against the power of darkness. Those engaged in deeds of darkness cannot fight against the darkness. So we must put them aside. That means we must repent of our sins. At the same time, we should put on the armor of light. Only the light defeats the darkness. We have no light in ourselves. We need to put on the light of Jesus.

In verses 13-14 Paul exhorts us more practically: **“Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh.”** Carousing and debauchery describe a lifestyle of wild partying, abuse of alcohol and drugs and extreme sexual immorality. This sounds like a description of Roman nightlife. Modern people use terms like “hookup” or “friends with benefits” to minimize the seriousness of sexual sin. Yet those who live this way fall into jealousy, fight with each other and hurt each other deeply. What is worse, they pile up God’s wrath against themselves. How can we behave decently? It is impossible to do so in our own effort. We need to clothe ourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ. Just as clothes cover our nakedness, so Jesus Christ covers all our sins and iniquities. He enables us to overcome temptation and empowers us to live a

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holy life. He imparts to us the virtues of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience (Col 3:12). Then we can shine in the darkness.

One example is Augustine. In his, “Confessions,” Augustine tells of his conversion to Christianity (viii.12). In A.D. 386, at a time when he was desperate to break free from his old life, he sat weeping in the garden of a friend in Milan. Suddenly he heard a child singing Tolle, lege! Tolle, lege! (“Take up and read! Take up and read!”). He picked up a scroll lying there, and his eyes fell on Romans 13:13–14, **“Not in orgies and drunkenness ...”** Immediately his heart was flooded with a clear light, and the darkness of doubt vanished. One day, while he was on the road, he happened to meet an old girlfriend. He immediately turned around and began to run. His friend called, “Augustine! Why do you run away? It is me!” As he kept running he said, “But it is not me; I am not the one I used to be.” When he clothed himself with the Lord Jesus Christ, his life was totally changed, and he became a new creation. He became a great man of God who shines in the history of mankind.

May God help us to understand the present time and wake up from our spiritual slumber. May God help us to put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light so that we may shine in this dark generation.