

Romans 13:11-14 Living in the light of Christ's return

Introduction

'Why should I do it?' So many scenarios from the home to school, the office or the sports-field come to mind as an individual requests a justification for a course of action expected from them. Everyone will think such a thought however briefly on many days in their lives. Often about little things we will soon forget and on other occasions about much more significant and substantial matters. However, the question is valid because no-one will give of their best to something when they may have doubts at the back of their minds about the validity or usefulness of the task in hand.

Paul has described how we should seek to live for Christ with transformed minds as followers of Jesus in a world where many people around us do not share our convictions. He has explained how we should relate to the government whose ethos we may not agree with and how we ought to love one another in practical ways even though we not necessarily find some other people easy to relate to. The last paragraph of Romans thirteen gives the motivation for our desire to follow the apostle's guidelines for living as a Christian. It is a powerful reminder that we will not be here for ever. Time passes so incredibly quickly and cannot be regained. If we are not to waste our lives then time management is so important. Paul asks each generation of his hearers and readers to live for Jesus in the light of His return and the coming of God's eternal kingdom.

1. Understanding the times (Romans 13:11a)

(a) Understanding the times (in general) *And do this, understanding the present time...* Do we understand the times we are living in? I suspect for many of us it would be a hesitant 'yes' or a 'yes' and 'no' response! The reason is so simple to explain in that the world is changing so fast and so much is going on that our knowledge is usually incomplete and our comprehension partial, therefore, with appropriate humility we exercise a degree of caution about many things. However, if that is true of our knowledge of and interaction with the world in general, how confidently do we view our discernment of God's purposes and plans for His people between the first and second comings of Jesus? In Matthew 16:1-3 Jesus in a dialogue with both Sadducees and Pharisees uttered these remarks: *The Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus and tested him by asking him to show them a sign from heaven.* ² *He replied, 'When evening comes, you say, "It will be fair weather, for the sky is red,"* ³ *and in the morning, "Today it will be stormy, for the sky is red and overcast." You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.* This issue is not only addressed in the New Testament but was raised in I Chronicles chapter twelve. It is a list of officers and men serving with King David from the various tribes of Israel. However, in a list of names and numbers we read these significant words concerning people *from* [the tribe of] *Issachar, men who understood the times and knew what Israel should do – 200 chiefs, with all their relatives under their command* (I Chronicles 12:32). What does this 'understanding' involve? It is a godly wisdom to discern how, for example, we plan an evangelistic strategy to reach people for Christ at the present time. I thank God for the Christians who in the early 1990s and possibly slightly earlier who saw so clearly that small group engagement and interaction approaches to witness like Alpha, Christianity Explored or the 'Y' Course and others would be much more effective than big rallies in stadiums that were so effective, for example, at least up to the 1950s, but less so in the next few decades. I thank God for Alan Berry, then Minister of South Leith Baptist Church who saw not only homeless people needing assistance, but established a charity Bethany that has become an amazingly successful agency

for reintegrating former homeless people into the wider society. Or for John Kirkby with his passion for releasing people from poverty through the work of CAP (Christians Against Poverty). With hindsight most people can see how a good idea / vision will work and indeed has worked. Those who understand something of the times are enabled in a small way or a larger one to see into the future how God might work through human beings in local communities to extend His kingdom in individual's lives. It does not exclude looking forward to Christ's return and seeing signs of the end times but it is not our primary calling to focus on timetabling events before His return! We will be motivated by the fact that it is coming most definitely! But our primary energies will be taken up with determining how best we can use our limited time and energies to reach the most people with the good news of Jesus.

(b) **Understanding the present time** We must remember that there are two key words in Greek for time *chronos* (chronology – i.e. it is now 11:55am for example); and *kairos* (a specific moment when timing is very significant); for example in II Corinthians 6:1-2 Paul wrote: *As God's fellow workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain.* ² *For He says, 'In the time of My favour I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you.'* I tell you, **now is the time of God's favour, now is the day of salvation.** God at this time in history has given you an opportunity to respond to the good news of the Gospel will you take it? His emphasis here is on *the present time*. Some times there are people who want to live in the 'good old days' of selective memory when allegedly everything was much better than today! There are other people whose past mistakes or tragedies are allowed to define everything in the present because they are unable or unwilling to gain closure on the past –their own or someone else's. Do you need to close the chapter marked 'the past' and let go of unrealistic golden memories of how the present ought to be like an era long passed? Do you need to forgive yourself or someone else for past failures and bury the memories and begin to live in the present? Christians too often are either wistfully looking back to the glory days of a former era or wanting only to commit themselves to future ventures that have been successful; whereas Paul challenges his first readers and us to be the makers of history by investing in the present by faith believing that God now can work through you and me at this time for His glory. The ideal example here in understanding the present time is our strategy for the new work in Panmurefield. We had our original thoughts and plans but seeking God's wisdom through prayer and in consultation with Christian colleagues who have experience in recent church-planting we were led to the three stage strategy we have adopted for this new work. The first stage of intensive contact with members of the community and the provision of a range of relationship-building activities has been taking place with great encouragement from the initial responses. The second stage of more specifically Christian and evangelistic content through one-off events; Messy-Church style presentations; courses like Christianity Explored and others will precede the third stage at which worship services will be launched. Only when we understand the present times will we find means which God the Holy Spirit will use to plant new congregations and see the effective evangelism and the building up of existing causes. God is at work in Scotland. We must have a sense of prayerful expectancy of what He may do through you and me at the **present** time. The only question to pose here is this: what part are you playing in extending God's kingdom? There is work for everyone to do. Don't think I cannot do [what ever it may be]; rather I can do this –where can I serve in St Vincent Street or Panmurefield in whatever particular capacity may be required!

2. **The reason for understanding the times** (Romans 13:11b-12a)

(a) **The need to take our opportunities (Romans 13:11b)**...*the hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber...* What kind of 'slumber' might we as Christians be guilty of? It

can be a contentedness with things as they are; not wanting new people to come in and change things. There are slumbering churches that are very happy with the people attending and have no desire to go out and invite anyone else to come along or to meet with Jesus! The Great Commission of Jesus in Matthew 28 included these words: *Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,*²⁰ *and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.* (Matthew 28:19-20). The only relevant questions here are ‘how’ ‘when’ and ‘where’ we obey the calling of the Lord. Archbishop (of Canterbury) William Temple, more than half a century ago, reminded us that the Christian Church is the only organisation in the world that exists primarily for the benefit of non-members. As a member of the Baptist Union Board of Ministry I am so pleased to see so many people coming forward offering to serve in Christian ministries over the last couple of years. But this needs to happen at every level of church life not just for those seeking recognition as Ministers-in-training in recognition of service already rendered as well as future anticipated service. God has given every person here gifts to serve fellow Christians as well as other people in our communities. The only questions are ‘how’ ‘when’ and ‘where’. Is God speaking to you about this calling today?

(b) **Our time is limited** (Romans 13:11c) ... *because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.* Paul here makes three time references in this short passage. (i) **First of all...the hour has already come.** Jesus was conscious of timing in His ministry, as recorded in the Gospels. He knew that the primary purpose of His coming was His death and resurrection so His work prior to it prepared for that unique series of events. On a number of occasions He declared: *My time has not yet come* [for example, John 2:4 at the wedding at Cana in Galilee]. However, the time did come when He was very aware that the focus of His work here was soon to take place. In John 12:23-28, soon after Palm Sunday, Jesus said these words to His followers: *Jesus replied, ‘The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.’²⁴ Very truly I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.²⁵ Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.²⁶ Whoever serves Me must follow Me; and where I am, My servant also will be. My Father will honour the one who serves Me.²⁷ ‘Now My soul is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save Me from this hour’? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour.²⁸ Father, glorify Your name!’ Then a voice came from heaven, ‘I have glorified it, and will glorify it again.’* God’s door of opportunity for work and witness is not here forever. In particular local settings it can take years to start work in schools, for example, whereas in others there is a history of opportunities and good relationships. God has opened doors for us in this community as we have been willing to go forward in faith for Him. I don’t think this is an accident or coincidental. The progress we have already seen this year, I believe, results from the faith steps we took last year.

(ii) **The second** time reference is here in Romans 13:11c: ... *because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.* In the Bible the word salvation can be used in **three** ways to explain the amazing work of God for us through Jesus. It encompasses our past through the once-for-all -time sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. Romans 1:16 reminds of us this wonderful truth. *For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile.¹⁷ For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed – a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: ‘The righteous will live by faith.’* Through Jesus’ death in my place I have been justified, that is God looks on me, because of Jesus, just as if I had never sinned! Have you received this amazing truth and allowed it to sink deep into your heart? It can refer to our present growth in grace as we are (hopefully) becoming more like Jesus. Paul in Philippians 2:12-13 states: *Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed – not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence – continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling,¹³ for it is God who works in you to will*

and to act in order to fulfil His good purpose. The third and future understanding of salvation in its full and complete form is what Paul is referring to here in Romans 13:11c. In Romans 8:30 Paul expressed it in this way: *those He justified, He also glorified*. That is, we have become completely free from sin, and reflect fully and clearly the Lord Jesus who modelled for us the way to live, and have entered into the eternal life God has prepared for us, that in quality and quantity is what He had planned for humanity in His original creation. Romans 8:18-25 summarise Paul's teaching on this subject where he looks forward with eager anticipation to these future blessings.

(iii) The third time reference is in Romans 13:12a: *The night is nearly over; the day is almost here...* that is the day when Jesus comes again. John Wesley's famous statement that we should live as if Jesus was returning tomorrow but plan as if Jesus was not coming back for a thousand years captures something of the necessary tension between the 'now' and 'not yet' of God's plans and purposes for us as His people. Am I ready to meet the King of Kings should it be today? We can make a false assumption that we will render steady service over a number of decades but who knows how long they have to live or serve the Lord? Robert Murray McCheyne is a classic case. His world famous ministry in Dundee lasted a similar length of time to my time in Dundee in this congregation. An astonishing proportion of his parish were influenced by him or converted under his ministry. The key issue then is priorities. Are mine, are yours what they should be? One sobering example from the Bible is Jesus' disciples the night before the crucifixion. He asked them to do one thing to pray with Him, but twice they fell asleep completely unaware of the significance of the occasion. Luke 22:39-46 gives the details: *Jesus went out as usual to the Mount of Olives, and His disciples followed Him.*⁴⁰ *On reaching the place, He said to them, 'Pray that you will not fall into temptation.'*⁴¹ *He withdrew about a stone's throw beyond them, knelt down and prayed,*⁴² *'Father, if You are willing, take this cup from Me; yet not My will, but Yours be done.'*⁴³ *An angel from heaven appeared to Him and strengthened Him.*⁴⁴ *And being in anguish, He prayed more earnestly, and His sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.*⁴⁵ *When He rose from prayer and went back to the disciples, He found them asleep, exhausted from sorrow.*⁴⁶ *'Why are you sleeping?' He asked them. 'Get up and pray so that you will not fall into temptation.'* Jesus hadn't asked them to do something beyond their capabilities. Jesus' request could so easily be viewed in the light of Paul's words here to his readers: *And do this, understanding the present time...* (Romans 13:11a). The challenge before us today is simply am I aware of the relative shortness of time and the need to live in the light of eternity? How does Paul expect us to live in the light of such a statement in Romans 13:12a? His answer is given in Romans 13:12b-14.

3. How we ought to live at such a time as this? (Romans 13:12b-14)

(a) A Conscious Choice (Romans 13:12b) *So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armour of light.* No-one who has accomplished anything worth striving for will have done so by accident. Strenuous efforts are required to be the best we can be or to do the best we can with respect to a particular task. I am aware of reading about a few well-known professional golfers who needed to change their swing or alter their putting technique. They were successful in those cases, but in the accounts of what they had to go through to correct their skills references were made to hands so sore they were bleeding on occasions from the repetitive hours of training they had endured to make the required changes. If a man or woman will commit themselves to such efforts for earthly prizes and goals, ought not God's servants on earth dedicate ourselves to be the best we can be in His service? In I Corinthians 9 the apostle almost certainly after watching Games near Corinth that would be one of the forerunners of the Olympic Games wrote this: *Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize.*²⁵ *Everyone who competes in the*

games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last for ever. ²⁶ Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. ²⁷ No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize. (I Corinthians 9:24-27). What does this mean in practice in daily life for us? It is not simply a vague assent to doing what is right and avoiding things we know to be wrong. It goes further than that. It is a deliberate and intentional planning of our daily lives. It is a recognition that under the pressures of life there will be severe temptations to cut corners and do or say things that may be legal but are not right. We have seen the serious disquiet about MPs and their expenses accounts over recent years. Sadly it appears that the majority of the malpractice was legal even if it was certainly morally dubious. The trader may be tempted to overcharge for a product or reduce the quality of goods or services below acceptable standards; an academic may fail to reference properly the work of others on whose findings some of their own work is based. In all of our lives there are grey areas where we might get away with certain choices but in our conscience we know that God sees and prompts us not to go in that direction. Truthfulness in speech and integrity in character are two things that we ought to prize and work hard to maintain. Failures in these matters in relatively small things might unchecked lead to much more significant departures from God's standards for our lives. Paul invites us to be men and women of principle who will maintain certain standards because they are the right thing to do, regardless of what other people are doing. Periodically it is good to stop and look at our own lives and in the light of what we believe are God's standards ask ourselves if we are truly living as we ought to do. It may be, for example, that we had put in place boundaries for what we might see in films or on television or on-line. If God had directed you to do that-how are you getting on? If we are really struggling and crossing a line inappropriately then it may be wise to have an accountability partner of the same gender who is given permission to ask us specific questions about how we are getting on. In a society where relationship boundaries are often blurred - am I relating in an appropriate way to people of the opposite gender or my own gender? or with children or older people or with people with additional needs? If we maintain self-discipline, consciously determined day by day to maintain and uphold God-honouring standards of thought, speech and conduct, then other people will notice and hopefully it will in some small way help them come closer to trusting the Lord for themselves.

(b) **A Distinctive Witness** (Romans 13:13) *Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy.* In Numbers 32:23 there is a Bible verse part of which I heard many times as a child from my parents and other Christian adults. It states: *'But if you fail to do this, you will be sinning against the Lord; and you may be sure that your sin will find you out.'* There was a lovely pie that his mother had made and left in the fridge. He was informed that it was being saved for a special occasion in the very near future. Therefore, he had to resist the temptation to help himself to a piece. Later that day his parents went out and an older teenager was child-sitting in that home. All appeared to go very well except on her return the mother found that a piece of pie was missing. In the morning she asked her son what he thought had happened? He replied that the family's pet cat was probably responsible! His mother then asked since when would the cat have used a spoon like the one left in the pie! In essence the apostle here is asking each Christian in Rome to exercise personal self-discipline in maintaining God-honouring standards. It is more than just assenting to a list of things we don't do, but rather committing ourselves positively to do what is right- regardless of what others around us might be thinking or doing. In this church we will maintain records of people who are PVG checked for looking after our children; We will welcome onto our catering team and as helpers in the

kitchen people who will adhere to the appropriate hygiene standards in such an environment –not just because the Government expects us to but because we want to aim for excellence, in order to be the best we can be for God. People around us notice how we live our lives. Paul is hinting that the lifestyles of the majority of people in their city were very different from the convictions upheld by Christians. He was not worried by it, but was convinced that unless these younger Christians in the capital city of the empire lived distinctive holy lives that they would not have earned the right to speak openly about their beliefs to work colleagues and neighbours. Alan Donaldson at a relatively recent Baptist Union Assembly spoke about ‘outrageous generosity’ which might be a means of living out our faith amongst individuals who might have seemed closed to receiving more conventional approaches to faith-sharing. It is actually quite remarkable how many people who make no claims to faith can be so knowledgeable about our convictions the moment a Christian says or does something that they ought not to have spoken or done.

(c) **Christ centred living** (Romans 13:14) *Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh.* In other words consciously turn away from certain things and to other more appropriate things. Our shared convictions in the congregation about the nature of our identity fit so well with this verse. ‘Building a Christ centred church looking to Christ –growing in Christ - sharing Christ’. How am I getting on in living this in my own life? How am I getting on in living this way in fellowship with my fellow Christians? Are there areas for my improvement? May we love the Lord enough to determine to live this way; may we also love one another enough to get alongside one another when a brother or sister is struggling to live for Jesus as they should and encourage them to be the best they can be. Paul, in summary, wrote these powerful words to the church in Corinth in II Corinthians 5:6-10. May they also be words with which each of us individually and all of us collectively can identify with. *Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord.*⁷ *For we live by faith, not by sight.*⁸ *We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord.*⁹ *So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it.*¹⁰ *For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due to us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.* for Jesus’ sake, Amen.