

Bucket List

Romans 13:11-14

So, what's on your bucket list? What do you want to do before you pass from this life? Some people desire additional possessions – perhaps a certain car or a retirement home. Others desire new experiences – to travel to exotic lands or climb mountains. Some are focused on accomplishments – to finish a building project or complete a business deal. Still others desire to leave a legacy behind – to establish a charitable foundation or make sure that loved ones are provided for. Our bucket list tells us a lot about our priorities, doesn't it? So, what's on yours?

In today's passage, Paul would have us turn our thoughts in what is probably a different direction. Remember, in the first several chapters, he has carefully explained God's plan of salvation, proclaiming how sinners like all of us are saved by God's grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. And given this wonderful good news, accomplished by nothing less than the sacrifice of Son of God Himself on the cross, Paul turns in Romans chapter 12 to the way that we should live our lives after we have been saved. Given all that God has done for us, Paul says at the beginning of the chapter, we should give our whole lives to God, offering ourselves up as a living sacrifice to Him.

As chapters 12 and 13 progress, Paul moves to address how we should serve God in specific situations, how we should manage lots of different relationships – first with other Christians, then with our enemies, then with rulers. Last week, we saw Paul sum up all of this teaching with the exhortation for all of us to love our neighbors just as much and in the same way that we love ourselves. In other words, our offering of ourselves to God must include our giving of ourselves to meet the needs of others, no matter who they might be.

Now all of that is certainly a tall order, but I think we can at least admit that it makes sense. We know what John told us in our responsive reading this morning – God loved sinners like us so much that He gave up His Son as a sacrifice for all who would trust in Him. Since God has loved us this much, isn't love for others the least we can do in return? But in today's passage Paul reminds us of another reason for living in such a loving way: because our time on earth is limited, or as he puts it, because our salvation is nearer than it was on the day when we believed.

What does this mean? After all, didn't John tell us that whoever would believe in, would trust in Christ would have eternal life? And isn't the whole point of Paul's letter to the Romans an explanation of God's great plan to save sinners? Isn't the amazing good news that all those who trust in Christ as Savior and bow the knee to Him as Lord have already been saved? Well yes, of course all that's true, at least to a point. It's true that those who trust in Christ have no reason to fear the condemnation that awaits those who continue in rebellion against His righteous rule. It's true that those who trust in Christ are guaranteed that we will live forever with Him and with everyone throughout space and time who trust in Him as Savior and bow the knee to Him as Lord.

But while we remain in this world, sin remains a problem, both inside of us and in the world around us. While it's true that we have been freed from the power of sin, as individuals we are still subject to temptation, and we fall into it more often than we would like to admit. And as so many of our current events make clear, sin is still far too common in the world around us. While powerful men abuse their young employees, while tyrants hold the world hostage with nuclear weapons, while ISIS

thugs execute people because they claim the name of Christ, while over a million American babies die at the hands of abortionists every year, we cannot claim that God's plan of salvation is complete.

But a day of completion is coming, and Paul reminds us that it is closer now than it was the day when we first placed our trust, our hope in Christ. Such a day of blessed release from the scourge of sin may come for us at the time of our death, the moment when our spirits will leave our bodies and go to be with the Lord. But all of us, in one way or another will see the final conclusion of God's plan to save the world, on the day the Lord Jesus returns in power and glory to raise everyone from the dead and to establish His reign on earth, or as the Apostles' Creed puts it, when He comes to judge the quick, the living, and the dead.

So, given that we have already been saved by the blood of Christ, and given that our redemption will be fully and finally accomplished when Christ comes again, what does that mean for how each of us should live today? In this passage is Paul just giving us another reminder that life is short, so we should get busy checking off the various experiences and the accomplishments on our bucket list?

No. In fact, he's saying that we should re-examine everything that's on that list. He's saying that our bucket list, really all of our lives, should be focused not on ourselves but on God.

Look, for example, at verses 13 and 14, where he condemns rioting, which means carousing, and drunkenness. He warns us against chambering and wantonness, which is the King James Version's way of describing sexual promiscuity and sensuality. He says we should avoid strife and envying, all manner of conflict and jealousy.

Now, we might want to object that we don't do any of these sorts of things, that we aren't tempted to indulge in these particular types of worldliness, these specific sins. But in verse 14, Paul makes the sweeping conclusion that we are to make no provision for the flesh at all, which means we are not to gratify the fleshly, worldly part of ourselves in any way. In other words, we are not to go on focusing our lives on the pleasures, the possessions, and the accomplishments of this world, no matter how attractive to us they might be.

And why not? At least in part because of what Paul says in verse 12: the darkness of this present evil age is passing away, so we must cast off all the shameful things that people tend to do in the dark. Since the break of day is almost here, it's time for us to wake up to the reality of Christ's coming, and leave all those sinful, self-absorbed dreams behind.

So take another look at that bucket list. Does it really make sense to devote so much time and attention to what are really nothing more than ice sculptures and sand castles? Does it really make sense to put so much emphasis on things that are no more permanent than dreams?

But if we are to put aside the things of this world, if we are not to focus our lives on the things of the flesh, what should we do instead? Where should our focus be? In our day-to-day lives, what does it mean to walk honestly, to behave properly, as verse 13 says? Well, if we put the teaching of verses 8-10 together with what we've read in today's passage, at least part of the answer becomes clear. If we are not supposed to live in the shameless and selfish ways of verse 13, that just reinforces what Paul told us in verse 9 – we are to love our neighbors as ourselves. In short, we are not to live for our own pleasures, but for the good of others.

But that's a lot easier said than done, isn't it? After all, things that appeal to our flesh, our senses, are all around us. It's the things in this world, the things we can see and touch and taste that are so real to us, so meaningful, so urgent. How can we maintain a heavenly perspective, keeping our eyes fixed on the much greater importance and permanence of spiritual things?

Paul gives us a couple of hints in today's passage, and we find the first one in verse 12 – we are to put on the armor of light. Now, we know what armor is – it's something that is supposed to protect us and keep us safe. And it's obvious that in some way the light is a contrast with the works of darkness that Paul condemns. But how can light possibly serve as armor?

Well, let's turn back to the headlines, and think about the misconduct that has been happening all too frequently in corridors of power and in the entertainment industry – it sounds a lot like verse 13, doesn't it? And what has happened when these sorts of deeds have been revealed? These formerly powerful congressmen and directors and producers, the men who used to make laws and hold the door open to promising careers have now themselves been rejected and disgraced. As John says in our responsive reading, now that their evil deeds have come into the light, they have been reprovved.

Okay, so what would have protected them from the shame they are now experiencing? Putting on the armor of light. If they had chosen to live in the light of love for God and love for others rather than in the darkness of sin and shame, they would have had nothing to hide, right? Wearing the armor of light thus means living in honesty and openness and transparency. It means living a life of integrity, of behaving according to what we say we believe. Such a life will surely protect us from all sorts of problems.

But again, how can we do that? How can we consistently turn aside from all the temptations of the flesh, from the desire to go back to dreamland, living for all the transient desires of this world? How can we truly put on the armor of light, walking consistently in God's law of love?

Look at how Paul concludes today's passage: if we are to put on the armor of light, we are also to put on the Lord Jesus Christ. In a very real sense, it is only as we are connected to Christ by faith that we are able to overcome all the temptations of this dark world. For as we trust Christ more and more, His Word and His will become more meaningful, more real to us. What He wants takes on more significance, and we become more willing to defer to His judgment, to wait on His timing, to let Him determine what will really satisfy our deepest desires. The more we live in Christ and the more Christ lives in us, the less urgent the desires of this world will be, because the joy that Christ offers to us will become so much more real.

So, take another look at that bucket list. Can any of those things compare with the presence of Christ? So, does it really make sense to go on living in the darkness when God offers us the blessing of light? Does it really make sense to go on grasping at shadows when God offers us the reality of His love? The good news is that God has already given all who trust in Christ the best possession, the best experience any of us could ever hope for – shouldn't we be satisfied with Christ Himself?