

“Getting Ready For Christmas”
(Romans 13:11-14)
The First Sunday in Advent, December 1st, 2013
Pastor Espinosa

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. I hope you had a good Thanksgiving, even though it was marred by the invasion of Black Friday when it wasn't even Friday but still Thanksgiving. While we were in Bakersfield to see family, my wife took my niece to Walmart who had a voucher guaranteeing my niece a purchase of a high-demand item...all she had to do was interrupt her Thanksgiving between the hours of 6 and 7 pm. Traci said that the lines at the Walmart were winding through the regular aisles of the store. It was a complete madhouse. We made it back home to Lake Forest Friday evening, but on Saturday morning as I was writing this sermon, I heard a Walmart television commercial advertising its “Black Friday” sale spilling over this entire weekend. In other words, “Black Friday” extends its tentacles of commercialism both *before* and *after* Friday! In the meantime J.C. Penney came up with a jingle that replaces “Fa La La La La, La La La La,” with “Go Go Go Go Go, Shop Shop Shop Shop.” This is beyond nauseating. Of course we're just warming up, since tomorrow is “Cyber Monday.”

I try to put all of this in perspective. When I was doing my doctorate at the University of Birmingham, the program required a one-month residency for every year I was enrolled over six years, so I ended up spending a lot of time in England. Birmingham is the second largest city in England, so it's a pretty happening place. I would do my grocery shopping at Sainsbury's which I believe is the leading grocer in England. It's a good grocery store with really everything you need, but I noticed a different feel in the store in comparison to our stores here in the U.S. Frankly, the difference is that our stores have an over-flowing abundance that is practically extreme. We are extraordinarily spoiled in our country.

My experience, however, is nothing compared to some of us who have spent time in countries suffering in poverty. In comparison to these countries, a U.S. store has more on their shelves in one of our aisles than the entire inventory in the stores of countries struggling to supply basic needs.

I can't shake the image of people in the Philippines currently overjoyed just to have food to survive right now vs. the image of Americans with stuff coming out of their ears.

And the particular life distraction that I've just described is just *one* distraction from your walk with God among many. For example on a separate note from the stuff-craze in our

materialistic society, we joke about the whole food thing. A report said that the average American will need about 4 ½ hours of cardio exercise to work off the amount of food they ate for Thanksgiving. I told myself that I would take a better approach this year, but that didn't keep me from a slice of apple pie, a slice of pumpkin pie, and a slice of key lime pie. It is easy to laugh off certain sins, but gluttony is a real problem. So there are two distractions that I've now listed, but there are many more.

The one I mention now comes from your pastor who is a huge sports enthusiast: I was reminded that Thanksgiving was an amazing opportunity to foster precious relationships. You know, regardless of how you feel about your extended family, these are people that God has put into your life. He has done so for a reason. We can choose how we will treat these relationships. In many cases, you are God's chosen instrument for sharing the Gospel with the members of your family. But – while we have these golden opportunities set before us – what so often happens is that our huge, loud, and impressive “entertainment” systems can completely swallow up the atmosphere. On Thursday, the Oakland vs. Dallas NFL game was a game of interest for me, on Friday, the Lakers-Pistons NBA game was a game of interest for me, and yesterday, the UCLA-USC NCAA football game was a game of interest for me, but what are these in comparison to the relationships? Last Thursday, I spoke to one dear family member about what is important and what lasts in life, a conversation that led us to the one thing needful: the Lord; last Friday, I reminded a dear family member that Jesus is her key to heaven...these moments were worth more than the sum total of sports I could ever watch in my entire life.

But these are just three distractions, just three. This is also the season for drink. Even those of us who do not drink much at all, it is so easy to find ourselves at parties where social drinking is as easy as chips and dip. But alcohol quickly takes on a life of its own. At one of the conversations last Thursday, I shared with family members gathered that the wine we shared at that table was complementary to the four uses either described or prescribed in Holy Scripture: the Word of God either permits or directs the use of alcohol for 1) medicinal purposes; 2) to help the bereaved; 3) to celebrate; and 4) the Lord's Supper. As we drank wine, both my brother Larry and sister Susan added the good addendum: “but in moderation,” to which I replied, “Amen.”

But how easy is it for us to slip and go too far? Even the strongest Christian never matures past the possibility of falling on account of drinking too much. The strongest Christian has the ability to get carried away, drink too much, and then do or say something they will later regret. It has happened among Christians in the body of Christ and it can easily happen again.

Why I am taking this real-life inventory? Because the combined distractions are formidable in threatening to completely erase from our view what is really important: living in faith, hope and love. And what is perhaps the most serious distraction is one I haven't even mentioned yet: the holiday's are a time of stress. In my 22 years in pastoral ministry, I know this seasonal dynamic like the back of my hand: family conflicts are heightened, financial burdens are magnified, personal struggles with depression are easily aggravated, time-management is tested to the limits. That is – unfortunately – the season of “peace on earth” through our Savior Christ is often morphed into the season of anxiety and stress. This is the season for blow-ups and blow-outs and I'm no longer talking about big sales in the stores.

Put all of these distractions together and now we know why Saint Paul addresses the Christians in Rome this way (of course we have to make adjustments for cultural evolutions), but the words are quite applicable to us as well:

Romans 13:11a: *“Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep.”*

This is not an admonition for unbelievers to come to faith. No, again, Saint Paul is writing to Christians. These people are already converted, these people know that their sins are forgiven and they know that they have eternal life in Christ. At the same time, they are encumbered by serious worldly distractions. Our distractions are capable of lulling us to sleep. Obviously, this sleep is metaphorical and Saint Paul does not mean actual sleep. This is the symbolic “sleep” of getting so distracted by the world that your faith seems to get lost in a maze. In the face of the world's distractions, your faith can seem to disappear as if it were sleeping. The priorities of the faith can easily take a back-seat to the priorities of the world. And if our faith falls asleep on account of these, then we become “lukewarm” Christians who are in danger of losing our relationship with the Lord!

This is the sin being revealed in today's epistle. Take it to heart Christian. Think about it: how does materialism, food, entertainment, drink, and stress impact your faith? How often do these things -- and the many other distractions of this world described as “the night” in verse 12 -- make you so tired, so busy, so encumbered that frankly, it's easy to feel like you've run out of time and energy for prayer, for worship, for serving others who are less fortunate, for taking the time necessary to apply forgiveness to that relationship, and/or for taking the time necessary to share the Gospel? From the perspective of sin, the evil influences in the world, and the devil, these distractions are designed to make you ineffective in your faith so that you will sink into despair and not only be of no good to others, but even be an instrument of pain and further distraction to others. These are the things of “the night” that Saint Paul is warning us

about and it's as real as Black Friday and Cyber Monday, but unfortunately these things of "the night" pervade all seven days of the week, all year round; and these things wind up and down souls far worse than the winding lines in Walmart.

But it's in getting to this next verse at Romans 13:12a that mentions "the night" that we gain an invaluable perspective about our Christian lives. Here is the verse combined with the second part of Romans 13:11:

Romans 13:11b-12a: *"For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. ¹²The night is far gone; the day is at hand."*

In many places in Holy Scripture, we are motivated to live out our faith in view of the past. For example the words describing our sanctification, our Christian walk in Romans 12 (verse 1: to present your body to the Lord as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God) is presented in view of the past. Romans 11 reveals God's past covenant and mercy to all. In other words, you and I are to be motivated to live for God in light of what the Lord has already done for us; His past great deeds for us, and most especially His atoning sacrifice when the Lord died on the cross to cover our sins with His blood. We are motivated to love God on account of Christ's great love demonstrated on the cross of Calvary. Amen! But this is not the only view that motivates us to live for God. Another view, an additional view is to give us motivation to live for God and not fall asleep at the helm! It is the view of the future. It is getting ready for Christmas; and it is getting ready for the next Christmas called The Last Day and The Glorious Second Coming of Christ...we are to live in faith – and not fall asleep – for what is coming.

Last Thursday after driving Bakersfield, and having a wonderful breakfast that my mom and sister cooked up, I had spent time to get my I-pad set up on Skype so that we could enjoy a Thanksgiving visit with my daughter Danielle and son-in-law Simon in Germany. We got to do that and it was wonderful, but then the next thing I know my wife said, "It's time to go!" It was time to get in the car and drive to my niece's house where the family was gathering for Thanksgiving. But I was a mess. I had on sweats, my hair was sticking out in all directions...now in view of what was coming, I had to hurry to get ready, jump in the shower, etc. I was extremely motivated, because the big get-together was about to happen!

This is the feel of Romans 13...you and I are now motivated to live as believers in light of what is coming. The coming of Christ represents a glorious light so bright that it is as if the current world, this current time is already being invaded by that light. Even though this time is the time of darkness, it is as if – for the Christian – the darkness is already past and the day is at

hand. Jesus is coming. We must get ready for Christmas. We must get cleaned up, get properly dressed, because its time, the big gathering is about to begin.

Chrysostom wrote, “Paul is not trying to frighten his hearers but to encourage them, so as to detach them from their love of the things of this world. It was not unlikely that at the beginning of their endeavors they would be more dedicated and slacken off as time went on. But Paul wants them to do the opposite – not to slacken as time goes on but to become even more dedicated. For the nearer the King is, the more they ought to be ready to receive him (Oden, Thomas C., ed., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament VI Romans*, Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1998: 333).”

All of this means that the Christian is called to get properly dressed. This is an important detail and I need to ensure that we understand this business of getting dressed.

In God’s Word, you are dressed or you have something “put on” you in two senses: 1) in the sense of a dressing that occurs while you are **passive**; and 2) in the sense of a dressing that occurs while you are **active**. When you were saved, when salvation was already given to you through the first coming of Christ, through His life, death and resurrection and when in the past – you were baptized into Christ – your getting dressed in Christ or putting on Christ was something God did for you. You were passive. He was active. You were dressed.

But there is a second sense of getting dressed in God’s Word pertaining to your sanctification, your new active life in Christ. In this dressing God -- whose mercy and grace still effects and empowers this entire dressing -- also permits you to be actively involved in the dressing and the putting on. Your born-again life is active. As active as you are to shop, to eat, to watch, to drink, and to manage your time -- all of which God permits and without that sustaining arm, we would experience none of these things -- you are also active to live out your faith. Ours is an active faith and we affirm that faith without works is dead (James 2:17).

So God through Saint Paul commands in this imperative section of Romans 13:12b-14 to describe how we actively live in the light of the future glory that is already shining upon us! Douglas Moo puts it this way: “our relationship to Christ, the new man, while established at conversion, needs constantly to be reappropriated and lived out...(The *New International Commentary on the New Testament*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996: 825).” So here’s how our epistle concludes:

Romans 12b-14: “So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.

¹³Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual

immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. ¹⁴But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.”

There is a splendid organization to these imperatives. There are three sets of complementary pairs:

- 1) Put off/put on...
- 2) Walk decently/not in...
- 3) Put on the Lord Jesus Christ/make no provision for the flesh...

As the big gathering approaches, you are called to get dressed dear Christian in a way that fits the occasion of the Lord's coming, and where there is a certain dress, there is a certain conduct that matches that dress. Here I am elaborating on the second half of the second pair; these are the things we are quite simply called to avoid. These things don't go with Christmas clothes; they don't go with people ready for the light of Jesus' glorious coming, so don't get dressed up in these, because these will make you soiled and dirty; these deny the Savior who comes:

- 1) Intemperance.
- 2) Impurity.
- 3) Discord.

God's logic is impeccable. First, intemperance leads to losing self-control, then we commit something impure, and then what remains the morning after? You guessed it, discord. But again the point here is not morality for the sake morality. The point is to consider what is coming. The light is beautiful and it is a salvation that is nearer to you than ever before (verse 11). For you dear Christian, the night is far gone, your sin can no longer condemn you and God has already shed the light of His Son on you. His light covers your darkness and has drowned the power of your sin. He has already dressed you in His righteousness and now gives you His Spirit to live in the armor of light which He does not call you to empower, but is empowered as you receive the gifts of Jesus. For example, through receiving once again the Holy Sacrament, Jesus' light will pervade your soul that knows the darkness of sin so that Jesus' light will once again prove to be greater. His grace is greater than your sin; His light more powerful than your darkness.

Now live in this light. It is yours Christian. You're invited to the party; you're a member of the family! The Lord makes His salvation nearer to you than ever before; you are so precious to Jesus that His day is at hand for you. The proof is right here; right now. He is dressing you, even as you dress yourself: receiving the Word in faith, and eating and drinking His body and

blood, sharing His peace and loving those around you. Look, God is making you ready for Christmas!