

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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UNDERSTANDING THE TIMES (2)

Romans 13:11-14

Just when we thought we had seen it all, we were shocked this past week when a disgruntled American from Illinois began shooting at Republican members of Congress and others at a baseball field in Alexandria, where they were practicing for the annual charity baseball game between Republicans and Democrats. Among the several wounded by the gunfire were Congressman Steve Scalise of Louisiana, who is still in critical condition, and Capitol Police Officer Crystal Griner. Sad to say, partisan political polarization between right and left is at alarming levels. Vitriolic political language is commonplace, almost a deluge, in the public square. The demonization of opponents is on the rise. And violence is increasingly viewed as the way to deal with disagreements over public policy.

In other news, a Shakespeare in the Park production of *Julius Caesar* in New York's Central Park featured the assassination of a President Trump-like Julius Caesar. This, on the heels of comedienne Kathy Griffin's video in which she holds up the severed, blood-soaked head of President Trump, for which, to her credit, she has apologized.

Meanwhile, a Michigan farmer, Steve Tennes, and his family have been banned from the East Lansing Farmers Market, where they have sold their home-grown fruits and vegetables for the last seven years, because Tennes posted on his company's Facebook page their belief (and ours) that "marriage is the union of one man and one woman." East Lansing city officials found the Facebook post to be in violation of a city ordinance against discrimination and have barred Tennes and his family from selling their produce at the city's farmers market. Tennes and his wife have filed a lawsuit against the city for religious discrimination.

Not to be outdone, U. S. Senator and former Presidential candidate Bernie Sanders recently went on the attack against a Trump Administration nominee, Russell Vought, accusing Vought of religious intolerance and Islamophobia for having written, in a publication of Wheaton College, the evangelical Christian school of which Vought is a graduate, that "Muslims ... do not know God because they have rejected Jesus Christ, His Son, and they stand condemned." According to Senator Sanders, Vought's biblical beliefs regarding salvation and the person and work of Jesus Christ are not what "this country is supposed to be about" and thus disqualify him from government service. The senator has apparently forgotten or misunderstands the plain meaning of Article VI of the U. S. Constitution, which states that "no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office of public Trust under the United States."

Some days it is just hard to believe that things like these are happening in this country we love. We can hope that the shock of the attack on congressional Republicans this past week will result in a more respectful and conciliatory tone in our public discourse, including the reporting of the media and the pronouncements of the talking heads. I would love to be

wrong, but I seriously doubt that any temporary improvement in relations between the right and the left will last.

What, you may ask, does all of this political talk have to do with the Word of God, especially as it comes to us here in Romans 13? The answer is right before our eyes in verse 11, where Paul urges us to “(understand) the present time” and to conduct ourselves properly in light of it. We have a sacred responsibility before God and one another to understand the times in which we live, to understand the times in the light of God’s Word, and to live accordingly.

After reminding us of our ongoing, perpetual debt to love one another (13:8) – which includes loving “the other” (13:9), that is, those who are different from us in any of a gazillion ways, and loving our neighbors (13:9), whoever and wherever they are – Paul begins verse 11 this way: “And do this, understanding the present time.”

Do what? As we said last week: “Love one another, love the other, love your neighbor, understanding the present time.” Let your love for God (the first and greatest commandment) and your love for others (the second greatest commandment) be the defining qualities of your life. The time is always right for love, though love will take different forms in different circumstances and different relationships. There is never a time when it is not time to love. And you will never pay off the debt of love you owe, first to God and then to others, because of the love you have received from God.

But what does “understanding the present time” mean? What do we need to understand about the times in which we live?

MEN OF ISSACHAR

At the Session meeting on Thursday evening, I quizzed the elders to see if they could name the 12 sons of Jacob. Maybe you can name them all. I was particularly interested in one of the lesser known sons of Jacob, whose descendants are mentioned in 1 Chronicles 12:32. At this point in the history of Israel, Saul (Israel’s first king) has died, and David is consolidating his power as king over the nation as a whole. In 1 Chronicles 12, we read of soldiers from the 12 tribes of Israel who join David’s army at Hebron – men of Judah, Simeon, Levi, Benjamin, Zebulun, Naphtali, Dan, Asher, Rueben, Gad, and the half-tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh (the two sons of Joseph), plus one more: Issachar. Issachar was the fifth son of Jacob born of his wife Leah. He was the ninth son born to Jacob overall. The tribe of Issachar was not one of the more prominent in Israel’s history. But what is said of the descendants of Issachar here in this verse is praise of the highest order. It speaks of the “men of Issachar, who understood the times and knew what Israel should do.”

What the world needs now – and what the *church* needs now – is godly men and women like those descendants of Issachar, who understood the times in which they were living, who discerned what God was doing, and knew how God’s covenant people should respond. Isn’t that what this world needs today? Isn’t this what America needs? Isn’t this what the church needs as the people of God, called by God to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Matthew 5:13-16)?

Years ago, way back in the 1990s, Garrison Keillor, of *Prairie Home Companion* and *Lake Wobegon* fame, made an observation about the necessity of faith in dealing with the challenges facing our nation: “A little faith,” he said, “will see you through. What else will do *except* faith in such a cynical, corrupt time? When the country goes temporarily to the dogs, cats must learn to be circumspect, walk on fences, sleep in trees, and have faith that all of this woofing is not the last word.”

Keillor, unfortunately, is not clear on exactly the kind of faith needed or the object of one’s faith. What he is right about, though, is the need for faith – specifically, faith in the true and living God who has revealed Himself, His ways, and His will in the Bible – in order to understand the times in which we live and how we are to live out our faith in these days.

CHRONOS AND KAIROS

You may know that the New Testament employs two different words meaning “time.” One is the word *chronos*, which, of course, refers to chronological time. *Chronos* time is clock time or calendar time. It tells you the date and time at any given moment. The other word is *kairos*, which often connotes an opportune or decisive moment in time, or the moment at which God intervenes in a dramatic way to carry out His purposes. The word Paul uses for “time” here in verse 11 is *kairos*. There is a sense of urgency about the times, as it is critically important both for the Romans and for us to understand the times and to live in readiness for the coming again of the Lord Jesus Christ.

There are at least four things Paul wants us to understand about the time in which we live.

1. TIME TO WAKE UP

First, it is time for the church – for all of us as followers of Jesus – to “wake up from (our) slumber” (13:11). This is no time for spiritual lethargy or laziness. This is no time for napping or idle leisure when there are spiritual battles to be fought. This is no time to be a spectator, sitting passively on the sideline, when the Lord wants you to be engaged in actively living out your faith, using your voice and your gifts to advance the cause of God’s kingdom in truth and love.

It is time for each of us to get serious about our faith, about our relationship with Christ, about our discipleship, about our witness, about our service to Christ in the church and the world.

It is time for the church to *be* the church God wants us to be, to be an outpost of His kingdom in the midst of an alien culture and a rebellious world, to model for the world what life is like in the kingdom of God where Jesus is Lord of all. It is time for us to pledge and declare our allegiance to the triune God and to His sovereign and gracious rule over all people, places, things, and nations. Our allegiance must be first and foremost to Him, and only then to our nation under God.

It is time to wake up from the slumber of thinking that we can be good Christians just by being good Americans. If there was ever a time when that was true – and I doubt that there

was – it is undoubtedly not the truth today. There is way more to being a follower of Jesus than just being a good citizen. To equate the Cristian faith with the American way of life, in whatever way we idealize it, is just plain wrong.

2. THE TIME IS SHORT

It is time to wake up. Why? Here is the second thing Paul wants us to see: It is time to wake up because the time is short – because, as Paul says in verse 11, “our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.” Salvation in this context does not refer simply to the moment we first trusted in Christ, experienced the forgiveness of our sins, and received the gift of eternal life through faith in him. You may or may not remember just when that moment took place in your life. It happened in my life 50 years ago this summer, on August 23, 1967. I was 11 years old at the time. God graciously forgave my sins, gave me the gift of saving faith in Him, and redirected the course of my life.

What Paul has in mind here, though, is not that first experience of coming to faith in Christ. Rather, it is the final fulfillment of our salvation when the Lord Jesus returns in glory to put the finishing touches on all of human history and bring everything under His sovereign rule.

WHEN? NOBODY KNOWS

Do you know when that will take place? No one does. Paul didn't know. Peter didn't know. I don't know. Nobody knows. What we do know is that every day that passes brings the day of Jesus' return one day closer. And ... we know Jesus could come back at any time. It could happen this year. It could happen this week. It could happen tomorrow. It could happen at any moment. Like right now.

Just because we don't know when doesn't mean it won't happen. Nor does it mean we don't need to be ready. Because we do. *We do* need to be ready.

Paul writes about this in 1 Thessalonians 5 as well: “Now, brothers (and sisters),” he writes, “about times and dates we don't need to write to you, for you know very well that the day of the Lord (i.e., the day of His return) will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, ‘Peace and safety,’ destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. But you, brothers (and sisters), are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. You are all (children) of the light and (children) of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep” – there is that same imagery again – “but let us be alert and self-controlled. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ” (5:1-9).

It is time to wake up because the time is short. The time is short because Jesus could come again at any time. Even if it seems that His coming has been delayed, the time for us is still short, because of the brevity of this life. We live every moment, as Ray Stedman said, on the

edge of eternity. We are here today and gone tomorrow. Not a single one of us is guaranteed next year or next week or even the next breath. Every breath, every day, every year – it is all a gift of grace.

The time is short for each of us because we simply don't know when our lives here on earth will come to an end. So we must understand the times, and the time, both *chronos* and *kairos*, and live accordingly for the glory of God.

Since the time is short, it is time – always time – not just to wake up and be alert mentally, morally, and spiritually, but to be people who are known for our love for God, for one another, for “the other”, and for all the neighbors God brings into our lives.

3. TIME TO BE DONE WITH THE DEEDS OF DARKNESS

Third, it is time to “put aside the deeds of darkness and behave decently, as in the daytime” (13:12-13). The deeds of darkness include such things as riotous living, out-of-control partying, getting drunk, indulging your sexual urges with casual hook-ups, doing things that hurt and degrade others for the fun of it, and other things designed to create rifts or arouse envy and jealousy.

The deeds of darkness also include pornography, whether it is on a computer screen, a TV screen, your smart phone, or in the pages of a magazine or book. It is a scourge that will scar you and your relationships in ways you can't imagine. Don't let pornography get a foothold in your life. If it is already there, confess it to God. Repent of it. Ask God to deliver you and keep you from it. Be intentional about staying away from situations where you will be tempted, as Paul says in verse 14, to “gratify the desires of the sinful nature” – whether it is pornography, sexual sin of any kind, or any of the other deeds of darkness that may be a stumbling block for you. Be smart. Don't put yourself in compromising situations.

It is time, as Paul writes to Titus, “to say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope – the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for Himself a people that are His very own, eager to do what is good” (Titus 1:12-14). Amen? Amen.

4. TIME TO PUT ON THE LORD JESUS CHRIST

The final thing is this: If it is time to put aside the deeds of darkness, it is time to “put on the armor of light” and to “clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ” (13: 12, 14). The armor of light is a direct contrast to the deeds of darkness. The fullest description of this armor is in Ephesians 6, where Paul instructs us to “put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes” and “so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground” (6:11-13). That armor includes the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shoes of the gospel of peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God (6:14-17). These are evil days. The “day of evil” is here and now. The armor of God is a must at all times, lest we go down to defeat.

To put on the armor of God or the armor of light is essentially the same as clothing yourself with the Lord Jesus Christ. Clothe yourself with the love of Jesus. Make His values your values. Make His priorities your priorities. Clothe yourself with His character, compassion, kindness, patience, strength, mercy and grace.

Remember, as we said last week. It was these verses that God used to bring the man we call St. Augustine to surrender and saving faith more than 1,600 years ago.

Do this. Do these things, understanding the present time and how God wants people like you and me – how God wants His church – to live. As followers of the Lord Jesus, don't give in to the urge to let your voice or actions contribute to the vitriol or lawlessness of our times. Jesus expects better from us. It makes me cringe when I see or hear it. I'm sure it makes God sad. When you're tempted to lash out, or to post something on Facebook that is incendiary, call a time out and pray.

Don't get caught up in all of the "woofing." Don't do a lot of woofing yourself. Don't expect the culture or the government to embrace your faith. Don't let your love be lukewarm (Revelation 3:16). Don't try to straddle the fence. Be all in for God and His kingdom. And do everything in love (1 Corinthians 16:14). *Everything.*

Like the men of Issachar, let us be men and women who understand the times and know what God wants us to do. Lord, let it be so in us, to the glory and praise of God. Amen.