

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Neighbor: No Time to Lose”

Dr. Jay Howell

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[Good morning, friends. My thanks to Pastor Mark for offering this sermon to you in my stead. I regret not being with you today. As I write this, three out of four Howells are out of commission with a nasty stomach flu. At the moment I am the last one standing, but it's likely that when you hear this in the morning I will either be busy caring for the rest of the house with Frances still incapacitated, or I'll just be next in line. Plus, I am quite certain none of you want what we have.]

This is the final week of our sermon series “Neighbor,” exploring how we are called to live out faith in public.

As we wrap up today, a short word on what we'll be starting next week as we begin the season of Lent. We will be exploring the Book of Judges in the Old Testament, which not often a book that gets a lot of air time in the church, because it's not the most encouraging story. There are a few encouraging parts to it, stories that if you grew up in the church you might remember from Sunday School as a child, stories about those we might consider heroes in the Bible, folks like Gideon and Samson. But in sum, the Book of Judges isn't really a story of godly heroes. It's a story of a people unmoored, aimlessly wandering in faith, even while they're staying in the same place. And their story reminds us just how much we remain in need of an anchor in the Lord.

One further note about Judges, just as a fair warning. It is easily the most violent book of the Bible, not necessarily in body count, but in the graphic description of violence, and though it's not like we're going to draw pictures or anything, a few of the passages we will look at will describe some pretty violent acts. I offer that just as advance notice for any parents that might feel it more appropriate for their kids not to hear it just yet. If that's a concern for you, please reach out, and I can give you a heads up exactly which weeks may fall in that category.

Today, though, as we wrap up this series, we find Paul turning all his words about grace and living out that grace by faith into a call to action. Let's go to God's Word together.

⁸ Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for the one who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the Law. ⁹ For this, “You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,” and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” ¹⁰ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the Law.

¹¹ Do this, knowing the time, that it is already the hour for you to awaken from sleep; for now salvation is nearer to us than when we first believed. ¹² The night is almost gone, and the day is near. Therefore let's rid ourselves of the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. ¹³ Let's behave properly as in the day, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual promiscuity and debauchery, not in strife and jealousy. ¹⁴ But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts.

Romans 13:8-14

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Some years ago there was a troubled woman of faith named Monica. The reason she was troubled was out of concern for her son. She, like many mothers in the church, had sought to raise her son in the faith, seeking to teach him so that he might himself follow Christ with the same passion.

But he didn't buy it. Something about it did not sit well with him, so he paid lip service to his mother's words throughout his youth. It didn't help that her husband, the boy's father, did not share in that faith to reinforce it. So when he went off to college, he readily embraced a different lifestyle, what one might call hedonistic, I suppose as many sons and daughters sometimes do.

But he was brilliant too. Excelled in every subject. Ran laps around his classmates, and began to study philosophy and rhetoric. His academic career advanced. He quickly became not just a student but an instructor, and not long after left for advanced study at a prestigious school.

And perhaps a bit too impressed by his own intelligence, he considered the claims of the Christian faith to be kind of silly and held in contempt the faith that his mother had sought to impart to him in his youth. Among the reasons for that skepticism, for that contempt, was simply looking around, seeing the evil at work within the world, and wondering, even if there was such a God, of what use was following him, when there was little evidence that it made any difference whatsoever?

Those are some of the questions that, though not explicitly stated, are behind Paul's words here at the end of Romans 13. He invokes the "night" and the "works of darkness" at work within the world. To say the least, they can be discouraging to someone seeking to live the sort of life by faith that Paul had described in the previous chapter, one that seeks to "live peaceably with all" to "overcome evil with good," not to be "conformed to this world." How could you not be conformed to it, when it all seems so powerful?

Paul writes, just there in v. 8, "Owe no one anything," a powerful word to the debt-averse, "except to love one another." Think about what that means: that the only debt we should owe to others is to love them. Love as the sum of the law, of the life of faith, doing no wrong to a neighbor, as he puts it in v. 10. You can probably already hear words of Christ that kicked us off on this whole series when Paul offers in v. 9 that all the commandments are "summed up in this word, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

That's all well and good, and it sounds awfully inspiring to consider life that way, but anybody else, like that son steeped in philosophy rejecting his mother Monica's faith, have trouble buying it? What difference does it make to love your neighbor as yourself, when there seems to be so much pushing in the opposite direction?

And so where Paul goes next is so important for us to remember, because let's say you're on board in theory with the whole "love your neighbor as yourself" thing, let's say you're on board with the whole "So far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all" thing, there will come a day, and that day may have already come, when you ask yourself, "I mean, I'm trying to love my neighbor as myself, to live peaceably with other people, but I'm having a lot of trouble seeing what difference it could possibly make."

Might have been the sort of thing Monica thought too, seeing her son reject the faith she had tried to impart to him. "I've tried to teach the faith and live that faith by example so that my son might embrace the same," she might have thought, "but all he's done is go further and further away from it. So what difference did it make?"

Not too much of a stretch to imagine how discouraging that can be. And it's into that doubt that Paul offers a word of hope.

"Besides this," he says in v. 11, "you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers."

Paul's saying that because our salvation is nearer to us, we should be all the more ready to live a faithful life led by the grace of Jesus: "Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light," and "[putting] on the Lord Jesus Christ," as Paul puts it.

Now here's where folks might get a bit confused. Paul's saying on one hand that the day of our salvation drawing closer and closer, but then he's saying that as our salvation is getting closer, we should get ready by living in a faithful way, all the things Paul had been saying like not being conformed to this world and living peaceably with all and loving your neighbor as yourself. All of that is in response to our salvation drawing closer and closer.

And to that you might think, well wait a minute, if the day of salvation is getting closer, shouldn't I just focus on getting right with God and not mess with anything or anybody else?

But a big thing to remember here is that when Paul says "salvation," he doesn't just mean "Where you go after you die." He's talking about something even bigger than that. It's what he was talking about back in Romans 8 when he spoke of how "creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God." Romans 8 is another sermon, or a whole bunch of sermons, but the main point is that when Paul talks about "salvation," he means the renewing of creation, the fulfilment of Christ's kingdom, of heaven breaking forth.

Translate that all the way to what we're reading here, and when Paul is saying, "Our salvation is closer and closer, so love one another, love your neighbor as yourself," what he means is, what we do and how we live aren't in vain in the kingdom of God. But instead, the loving acts toward neighbor as precisely the sorts of things that God will use to usher in his kingdom at the last.

That's the word of hope behind everything that we've been talking about in loving our neighbor, whether it was the up-in-the-rafters talk about the nature of God back in Leviticus at the beginning of this whole thing, or whether it was the unreasonable, even offensive love shown by the Samaritan to the man left for dead on the side of the road, or whether it was very practical guidance Paul has given us in Romans 12 and 13. All of it is both a response to the grace of God in Christ Jesus, as well as the work by which God is building his kingdom.

Have you ever thought of your life that way? That God could be using *your* life, *your* actions, *your* love of your neighbor to bring about his kingdom, to bring about salvation? Even the smallest things, the smallest acts of kindness, the comforting word, the unreasonable grace to a stranger, the unexpected compassion. They're not just good things to do until we throttle off to heaven one day. They're part of the promise that God makes to us: that those who live and labor in Christ do not labor in vain.

Monica's son, the one who had left his faith and gone on to esteem in his career, started to feel he was laboring in vain. Though he thought he had left his mother's faith behind, something was still tugging at him. He sensed the emptiness of his own life, the emptiness of simply following after what he wanted, until one day he was walking through a garden, when he heard the voice of a child saying, "Take up and read." So he picked up a friend's Bible, and incidentally turned to this very passage in Romans 13.

He later wrote, “I wanted to read no further, nor did I need to. For instantly, as the sentence ended, there was infused in my heart something like the light of full certainty and all the gloom of doubt vanished away.”

In short order, this son left his academic and teaching career, was later baptized, and became a leader within the church. You might have heard of him. His name was Augustine, and the story of his conversion has inspired Christians for over 1500 years. But one part of his story that is sometimes overlooked is the impact of his mother Monica.

For her whole life, she hoped that all the acts of love, all the smallest things she did for her son, every prayer, every kindness, would not be in vain.

As it turned out, shortly after Augustine was baptized, Monica took ill and passed away. And grieving for his mother, Augustine wrote, “She neither died unhappy, nor did she altogether die.”

Friends, the promise of our Lord is that the acts of love for a neighbor that he calls us to, whether they’re for a child or a stranger, are not to earn his favor or to gain salvation, for that is by grace and grace alone. But he also promises that what we do in his name does not simply fade away into the distance but is a part of the kingdom and the salvation that God is bringing forth, nearer and nearer every day. And on that front, there’s no time to lose.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.