PUT ON THE ARMOR OF LIGHT

Romans 13:1-14
Key Verse 13:12

“The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light.”

Beginning with Romans chapter 12, we have been studying what is God's perfect will for our lives, in view of his mercy and grace. It is God’s will for us to offer ourselves to him and to his world salvation purpose as living sacrifices. It is God’s will for us to see ourselves soberly, and serve the body of Christ according to the measure of our faith. It is God’s will for us to love one another zealously, and so overcome evil with good. In chapter 13, we learn that it is God's will for everyone to submit to the authorities and obey the law. This is so because the spirit of rebellion in man is the greatest enemy to God's law of love. May God help us to obey the law of love that leads to righteousness, holiness and the eternal kingdom of God!

I. Submit to God's servants (1-7)

First, Authority comes from God (1). Look at verse 1. “Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.” Verse 1 is a logical syllogism that identifies the Creator God as the source of all human authority. No one who has authority has generated it on their own. It was received from above (Jn. 19:11), and it can be taken away at God’s discretion (Dan. 4:32). This is basic Bible faith, as basic as our faith in the Creation itself.

As a result, we must learn to treat human authority as God’s gift to men. That is, it is one of our talents among the many talents that we have received from God, along with our freedom of choice, our heart of love and our mind to understand. And like every other such gift, it was given with a purpose so that we might bear fruit to God. Genesis 1:28 says, “God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in
number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and
the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves along the
ground.” It is our divine obligation to use the gift of authority well, as
stewards and overseers of God’s creation. What is the proper use of
God’s gift of authority? In 2 Corinthians 13:10, St. Paul says to the
struggling church at Corinth, “This is why I write these things when I
am absent, that when I come I may not have to be harsh in my use of
authority – the authority the Lord gave me for building you up, not for
tearing you down.” We must know that we too have received authority
from God for the sake of building one another up as we make our
pilgrimage through this world to the kingdom of God. What do we say
when we receive a gift from someone? Thank you! Let’s say thank you
to God for this precious gift that enables each of us to be a source of
blessing and encouragement for others.

Second, The spirit of rebellion in man (1-2). Let’s read verses 1 and 2.
“Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there
is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities
that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels
against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and
those who do so will bring judgment on themselves.” God gave man
the gift of authority for the sake of overseeing and building up God’s
creation. But there is a problem. Man, whom God created and whom
God chose as the stewards of his creation, rebelled against God. There
was no justification for this rebellion. Rather, when the man and
woman listened to the temptation of the devil, they chose to forget all
of God’s love and hope for them as his children and heirs of his
kingdom, and they determined to take what they wanted for
themselves. There is no more tearful story in the history of mankind.
For man’s rebellion did not bring man greater freedom, greater
authority or greater wisdom, as they had hoped. Instead, man’s
rebellion brought darkness into the world, and darkness into our
hearts and minds. When man existed under God's authority, he was
free in his mind and heart to work hard and very creatively. For
example, when God brought man all the animals, he named them one
by one with a different name for each type, appropriate for its
character and appearance. But when man rejected God’s love and
authority, he became as stupid as Cain, who killed his younger brother
Abel in order to “earn” his Creator’s love and favor. The spirit of rebellion is the darkness which swallows up all the peace, love, joy, faithfulness, goodness, kindness and self-control of men.

Verse 1 says, “Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities.” Verse 2 says, “Those who [rebel] will bring judgment on themselves.” Rebellion against the authority of God has corrupted the use of God’s gift of authority among men. We sense that those who are in authority do not use it well, but are often arbitrary, thoughtless or even malicious in their intentions. In this way, the God-given authority of husbands, teachers, administrators and rulers has been compromised, and is too often used to tear down, rather than to build up. So we calculate: a little more rebellion is necessary to remove or subdue those who are misusing human authority, and then things will get better. Wives calculate why they should cook and clean for their husbands, when their husbands are so immature. Students calculate why they should work hard and study when their teachers are sometimes unprepared or don’t know the answers. Employees can’t count on their fingers and toes all of the mistakes and bad character traits of their bosses. And even in a democracy, where we get to choose our leader in free elections, the litany of bitter complaints against our leaders is growing by the day. But the spirit of rebellion is not the cleansing power it claims to be. Rather, the spirit of rebellion leads men into the darkness of sin. The Samaritan Woman was such a person who calculated why she had to submit to the man she married, when she could find a better man. But by the sixth man, she had no strength even to marry. She found herself isolated from all the other women of her village, tired and bitter because she had to get water all by herself from the well during the heat of the day. When she came to Jesus, she was the picture of a woman living in darkness, until Jesus asked her, “Will you give me a drink?” Jesus was sorry that his chosen people, the Jews, had rebelled time and again against God’s servants whom God had sent to help them bear the fruit of repentance and participate in God’s world salvation work. They had been like tenants to whom God had rented the best vineyard. He only looked for some of the fruit. Instead, they beat and killed the servants he sent. Now, God had sent his own Son, Jesus. It was the best expression of God’s love and hope for his rebellious creation, man. But men had in mind to kill
the Son and take the inheritance for themselves. Mark 12:9 says, “What then will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and kill those tenants and give the vineyard to others.” Those who rebel against God's purpose and hope for their lives by rebelling against the authority God has instituted indeed will bring judgment down on themselves.

Third, Submit as a matter of conscience (3-7). God’s authority is absolute. The spirit of rebellion is pervasive among men. So how can men submit to the governing authorities and to God? How can men escape the terror of judgment? Look at verses 3-5. “For rulers hold no terror for those who do right but for those who do wrong? Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience.” In these verses, Paul is appealing to men of conscience, that is, to Christians. We have a habit of rebellion. But those who know the grace of God and the love of God that spares them from hell and death must not hold on to their habit of rebellion. Instead, we must make see God's purpose in the gift of authority, and submit to the authorities willingly, as a matter of conscience. God establishes the law and the authorities because of his desire to reward those who do good, and the need to punish those who do wrong. We who are Christians should not remain as animal men who do what is right only out of fear. Instead, we should make a decision to do what is right for the sake of God, our hope in God and our mission in God. Paul said in Romans 7:16, “And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good.” We have a bad habit of rebellion. But we have a holy desire to do what is right and that pleases God. So we must acknowledge that the authorities are God's servants to help us do what is right, and we must thank God for the authorities. Let's say thank you for them with a deep thankful mind. Thank God for the authorities! Indeed, we owe the authorities quite a bit. May God help us to pay taxes, revenues, respect and honor to those whom God has established as our shepherds in this generation! May God help us when we do so to come
out of the darkness of rebellion, and into the marvelous light of his freedom and love!

II. Obey God’s law (8-10)

First, The debt of love (8). Look at verse 8. “Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law.” Again, Paul is talking to Christians. Christians are those who know that God sent his Son into this rebellious world out of his unfathomable love for us as his creation. If not for this love that surpasses all reasonable expectations human beings might have of God’s love, we could never have escaped the darkness of our own rebellion, or the judgment that we deserved because of it. And this love does not extend to one or two generations and for one or two times for each person. No! This love is limitless and beyond description or measure. So Paul prays for the Ephesian believers in Ephesians 3:16-19. “I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge – that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.” If this love had been extended to us because of our great feats or accomplishments, we might have something to boast about, and we might feel free from any burden because of Christ’s saving love. But as Romans 5:8 says, “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” God’s love did not fill up part of the gap that our rebellion had created between God and us. God’s love through Christ filled the gap completely, and then overflowed into our hearts and into the hearts of everyone who believes. We can never love God enough to compensate for his love for us. But we know that God’s love is given to us freely, so that we might meet our obligation to love our fellow man. Let’s read verse 8 once more, together. “Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law.”
Second, Fulfilling God’s law (9-10). The commandments of God given to the Jews were a blessing to a people having just come out of slavery in Egypt. Through these commandments, God gave specific directions for his people on how to conduct themselves in their relationships with God and with other people. But the spirit of rebellion in man had corrupted these commandments as well, until they became a tool in the hands of the religious leaders to suppress and burden God’s people (Matt. 23:2,3). Look at verses 9 and 10. “The commandments, ‘Do not commit adultery,’ ‘Do not murder,’ ‘Do not steal,’ ‘Do not covet,’ and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.” Many young people say in their youthful pride, “I was going to do that. But now that you say so, I won’t.” Their unthinking rebellion is the expression of selfishness like that of Cain, who said, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” We must not react to God’s law according to our habit of rebellion and pride. We must study the Bible until we can grasp with our whole mind and our whole heart that God’s law is ultimately the law of love. Therefore, to rebel against God’s law, whatever our excuse may be, is to rebel against the law of love, and is an expression of hatred made in service to the darkness. Rebellion and disobedience are self-serving. They tear others down and lead to judgment. But submission and obedience are the way for sinful men to be changed into instruments of righteousness, with a living hope in the kingdom of God. Those who submit and obey can build up others up and participate with them as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation in the world salvation purpose of God.

III. Put on the armor of light (11-14)

First, Understanding the present time (11-12a). Look at verses 11-12a. “And do this, understanding the present time. The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here.” We can say many things about this present time. But the most pertinent thing to realize is that this moment is passing by, and the judgment and salvation of God are drawing near. Rebellion is the luxury of those who don’t have to face judgment. If there were no
tests, why bother even going to class? We could sleep in all day. But because there is a judgment coming at the end of the semester, we jump out of bed and run to take numerous notes from all our professors. To believe in the salvation of Christ is to believe in the judgment of Christ. So we must stop sleeping and wake up to get ready for the coming judgment. Those who are found watching and waiting when that day comes will receive their reward (Mat. 24:45,46).

Second, The armor of light (12b-14). Look at verse 12b. “So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light.” The deeds of darkness are listed in verse 13, which says, “Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy.” We might wonder, looking at that list, just what those early Christians were doing! But that is our self-righteousness. These things, no matter how disgusting they may be, are in fact the “natural” outcomes for a life lived in rebellion against God. Those who do not control the spirit of rebellion in them become filled with all kinds of sick and disgusting thoughts, and eventually, they commit the perversions their minds have conceived. This is not an exaggeration. Was Cain a bad man? Was he not simply overruled by his jealousy for his brother Abel? Was Judas a bad man? Was he not simply overruled by his lust for money? You and I are human beings. Yet we are just as capable of the worst crimes of humanity as were the Nazis of Nazi Germany or the communists in Stalinist Russia.

In the light of this fact, we must make a choice. We can remain in the darkness of our proud and self-righteous minds, like Raskol’nikov from Crime and Punishment, who considered himself a “superman” who had the right to kill a petty pawnbroker to support himself as a student. Or we can put aside the deeds of darkness, and put on the armor of light. The armor of light is the shield God has given us through Christ Jesus and through his Word, which enables us to overcome the darkness in ourselves and the darkness in the world. What is it? What is the armor of light?

John 1:4 says, “In him was life, and that life was the light of men.” The armor of light is Christ Jesus himself. It is the forgiveness of our sins
that enables us to claim, “no condemnation.” It is the truth of God that “we are sinners – the worst sinners – but Christ Jesus died and rose again to atone for my sins and to purify me from sin.” 1 John 1:7 says, “But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.” Those who walk in the light have no righteousness of their own, for their deeds have been exposed. But they are shielded by the grace and mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ, and so they don’t have to fear anyone or anything (John 9:3-5; John 11:9,10; John 12:35,36). Only those who believe in the authority of God to judge and the grace of God to forgive can submit to others in obedience to the law of love. This requires a complete transformation. So Paul commands us in verse 14, “Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature.”

Stop thinking about how to justify your rebellion and disobedience to God’s word! Come into the light, where Christ sets you free from the darkness, and enables you to experience God’s love and victory! Only in the light can we realize our true potential, creativity and humanity. Only in the light can we find true love, life and joy. May God bless you to put aside the deeds of darkness, and put on the armor of light!

Let’s read our key verse. “The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light.”