

Romans 13

Love for One Another

⁸Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. ⁹The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet"; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself." ¹⁰Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

An Urgent Appeal

¹¹Besides this, 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; ¹²the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; ¹³let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. ¹⁴Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

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Wake Up – The Urgency of the Gospel

Romans 13:8-14

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You know what time it is. Time to wake up and smell the coffee. Time to get your act in gear. Time to lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. Get it together people. This is it. Your salvation is at stake. The night is gone, the day is near, and I don't know how much time any of us has left.

Do you hear the urgency in Paul's voice? This is a red exclamation point email, except it wasn't an email. It was a hand carried letter, before Fed Ex ever guaranteed anything overnight. It probably took weeks or longer to get from Paul's hand to its intended recipients. It was moving slower than we can even imagine snail mail to go and yet the writer expected the readers to sense the immediacy of the message and wake up to what was really going on in the world.

I dare say that in our current "speed of the Internet world" we get hundreds of urgent messages just like this every single day. Change your diet. Exercise more. Save the planet. Sign this petition. Get a job. Now get a better job. Donate to this charitable organization. Answer your mother's text. Fix this problem before there's another problem. It's not that the messages are inherently bad, but the speed in which we receive them, and the expectation that all of them are top priority is mentally and emotionally exhausting. And for teenagers and some young adults, the built-in urgency to keep up with everything happening on social media is creating anxiety and depression in their world where the devices are never shut off and the cycle continues 24-7. The commandment we plugged in, first world, people break the most isn't even mentioned in Paul's list. We don't know how to have "off" time or Sabbath time anymore. In a world where EVERYTHING is urgent, that

means that we don't know how or when to be discerning with our time. We can't or won't turn off the constant stream of thought that demands our attention at every turn. We are conditioned, quite well in fact, to believe that the world won't go on if we don't keep spinning it ourselves.

Let me back up a minute to fill you in on just how insidious this is. Tristan Harris exposed some of the big tech companies' trade secrets in his TED TALK, "How a handful of tech companies control billions of minds every day." Intriguing title, isn't it? Well it caught my attention, and I sat and read the transcript with my chin dropping into my lap. Here's how he opens his talk. He says, "I want you to imagine walking into a room, a control room with a bunch of people, a hundred people, hunched over a desk with little dials, and that that control room will shape the thoughts and feelings of a billion people. This might sound like science fiction, but this actually exists right now, today." He says that he knows this is true because he used to be one of those people as a design ethicist for Google where he studied how to as he says, "ethically control people's thoughts." The key to it is, as he shared in his talk, gaining control of people's time.

Those notifications you get on your phone... The fact that YouTube starts playing the next video for you... The Snapchat stories, which is the top app for American teenagers right now, that keep track of how many days running that you've had a conversation with your friend knowing that you won't want to break a multi-day streak... The pop up ads on Facebook that match exactly what you have been searching online or even talking about on your phone... All those things are cleverly designed to keep you clicking, posting, and purchasing. It's gone way beyond the red exclamation point email, and the 24-hour expectation of a business response. It's changing your mindset to respond as often as possible for as long as possible to a device a whole lot of us now keep in a pocket or purse.

It's also one of the ways that our news cycle has transformed. One of the discoveries of just such a control room was that the more you are outraged, the more time you will spend on that news article. So if the article really "gets you," then not only will you spend more time with it, you might comment or repost, or want to get your friends just as angry as you are. Harris says, that outrage is so easy to manipulate because it's not something you choose, it's something that happens to you. This mad dash for gaining more of our attention has had the effect of deepening the divide of right leaning and left leaning news sources as we spew more outrage rather than take the time to figure out what is happening beneath the headlines designed not to keep us informed, but to make us mad. In that way, we are all victims of "fake news" or at least the "infuriating news" that is literally designed to steal as much of our attention as possible.

So between listening to Paul and being rather foolishly attached to my mobile device, I have to ask myself the question, what really is urgent for us today? What will wake us up from sleep? What will remind us that salvation really is near to us, right now in this moment? In this 24-hour, never ending stream of data bits vying for our precious attention, do we know night from day? Do we know what time it is? Or do the urgent messages all run together and paralyze me from really doing anything?

I wonder if Paul's message is the real wake-up call we need. He was also speaking to Rome in this case which, for its time, WAS the center of cultural sophistication. They had plenty of things to distract themselves from the urgent message of God's love, just like we do now. Over the din of our noisy Internet world, can we hear the God-sent urgency to pay attention to love, to the truth, to fidelity and sincerity in relationships, to the sanctity of life and concern for our neighbor? Can we fulfill God's law, not by spending more time on our computers and devices, but by connecting with our neighbor, and acting out the love of Christ in our lives?

The word “urgency” itself implies both immediacy and importance. It can’t be that all these things that we’ve been conditioned to pay attention to by these tech companies are all equally important. That’s the part that seemed to be missing in Harris’ explanation of what he did for Google as a design ethicist. The impetus behind what the tech companies want is to capture more of our time, not for our time to be spent well or in meaningful ways. Ultimately that’s up to us, right? Blaming the internet for our troubles is not my intent today, but exposing how they do what they do might give us pause to consider how we might be being manipulated in our daily lives so we can more clearly and deliberately choose how we spend our time for ourselves.

Paul knew that as human beings, our distractions are many. He can drive us as biblical seekers a little bit crazy with how often he makes condemnations on this or that, but his intentions, I think, are sincere. He wants to keep us focused on what is our urgent command, on what Jesus said was **THE MOST IMPORTANT** practice for us to do with our lives, “Love one another.” If, in the midst of all our other time-sucking habits, we forget to love, then we’ve missed the point. I can spend all day being outraged at injustices on Facebook, but if I haven’t moved a muscle to make a difference for my neighbor, for my community, or in my real time relationships, then I’ve not been paying attention to the right kind of urgency. I haven’t woken up to the fact that the time for loving others is not tomorrow morning – it’s **RIGHT NOW**.

That’s the brilliant thing about Paul’s message, the urgency of the matter doesn’t change whether it was being hand-carried by Paul’s messenger to the Christians at Rome, or read by us on another continent in another language nearly 2000 years later. The urgency of what I get online changes by the minute, maybe faster. What matters right now is gone by the time I get home this afternoon and is replaced by a story trying to be newer and even more sensational. And this is the exact same thing that is happening on both Fox News and CNN if you spend more time with your

TV than your computer. So that is enough to tell me that I'm not going to come across enduring truths in the bylines that I now know are designed to instantaneously make me mad. The truth in the long game is calling to me today to wake-up to how and when and where I spend my time. Is it on the things that really matter? Am I putting on the Lord Jesus Christ, even as I sit in front of my computer and read the news of the day? I hope so. I'm going to make more of an effort to wake up, so rather than having my thoughts be manipulated by design ethicists in a control room, my thoughts can turn to the immediate and important needs of my neighbor – because I think that's what Jesus would want me to do. Amen.