

## Ordering Your Private World (from the Series “*Longing for Change*”)

Romans 13:8-14

Teaching Elder, Dr. Gene Cornett

Sunday, October 27<sup>th</sup>, 2019

### Dr. Gene Cornett, Teaching Elder:

Let’s pray. Father, I ask you that you would help us to hear from you and see, and to think well of our need to become, to intentionally seek to pursue, to become who you’ve already made us to be, and to also, with a look forward like the song just talked about, to become what we one day will be in completion. Father, there is nothing that we need more this morning than a renewed vision of who you are, of who we are, and what you are about in the world. Father, you have promised us that if we abide in you and you in us and your word abides in us that you will bear much fruit. Father, I pray that in *this* moment, as we open up your word together, that you will bear much fruit—whether it’s fruit that we can see, or fruit that will only be known in eternity as your business. But God, our confidence is in your work, in the power of your word to accomplish your purposes in these moments. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

Before I get into the message, I want to mention one thing to you: if you’re new, and you haven’t been a part of one of our Trunk-or-Treats before, we don’t just pass out candy and do a cake walk and such; we make a very overt effort to share the gospel with people in some creative ways. I want you to know that. And, we need your prayer because we need, as Paul said, we need for God to open a door for the Word, that people may be able to hear through the unique means by which we go about sharing the gospel. So, if you’re here, I hope you’re praying; if you’re home caring for children in your neighborhood, I hope you’ll be praying for what’s taking place here.

Two things brought a fresh, a kind of bracing sense of clarity for me this week. One of them was a report that came out in the news that you may or may not have heard about. It was a report from the Pew Research Center, and their report—this comes right out of the report—said, “The religious landscape in the United States continues to change at a rapid pace.”<sup>1</sup> Phone surveys between 2018 and 2019 say that 65% of American adults described themselves as Christians. That’s down 12% in ten years. That may not sound a whole lot, but it is a dramatic shift. And, those who describe themselves as unaffiliated or atheist, or agnostic, or nothing in particular were 26%. That’s up 9% in ten years—also a dramatic shift. Atheists doubled. Now, it was only from 2% to 4%, but still a dramatic number.

The other thing that got my attention and brought me to some fresh clarity this week was I was having a conversation with a new friend of mine, somebody that I had just met a few weeks ago. He doesn’t go to church anywhere, and we were just talking about some of these kinds of matters. And God brought me this sense of clarity in the moment talking to him. We were actually right out here in the foyer, and I said: *it’s my sense that people outside of the life of the church have a sense that what we’re doing in here is that we’re trying to coerce people into*

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<sup>1</sup> “In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace.” *Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life*, Pew Research Center, 17 Oct. 2019, <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>

*seeing the world the way that we see it, and to get them to adopt our values and way of living. And some of them believe that we'll do that by political force if we have to do it. And then I said to him: but here's what we're actually doing—we're not doing it perfectly, and in a lot of ways, it's Christian people's fault over generations that there's such a downturn in the culture. But I said: here's what we're actually aiming at doing: we're worshipping a person who laid down all of his privilege and power for the sake of serving and suffering for His enemies. And the more that we worship Him, the more that we get to know who He is and why He did what He did, the more it makes us like Him. The more it makes us into the kind of people the world desperately needs.*

And I didn't say this to him, but I'll say this to you: the most important thing that *you* can do personally to help this country is to engage *fully* in a local church body that understands that that's what they're trying to do, however imperfectly that they are doing it. And you pursue Jesus with all that is in you in cooperation with another group of believers who are meeting in a church, meeting together—wherever they're meeting—to seek to do that, and you seek to encourage, and to invite, and engage other people in doing that. That is the single most important thing that you could do to help this country. It is the single most important thing that you could do to help your own personal wellbeing. It is the greatest thing that you could do to help grandchildren you may have one day if you are young, to fully immerse yourself to do that. It's not to fill this building. I'm not just talking about this particular local church body. It's certainly not so that we can feel good about ourselves, or to pat ourselves on the back, to impose our views. Certainly not to get entertainment. I mean, certainly now that's it's 11:30 and I'm up, you can get better entertainment. But the impulse to serve, the impulse to protect the weak and the vulnerable, to love well comes from Jesus, and the further that this culture gets away from Him and His church, it is going to be increasing disaster.

So, how can you and I find a sense of urgency to be willing to do what it takes intentionally to be able to make spiritual progress? Often the reason that we don't grow spiritually is because we have no intentional plan to do so; we feel no urgency about it, and it's ok if it happens, but we have no real intent to go there and to do that. The title of this morning's message is "Ordering Your Private World" because what we're aiming at is change that happens on the *inside*—inside out, not outside in. I'm in Romans chapter 13. In just a moment, I'm going to begin with verse 8.

Romans chapter 13, verses 8-14, "Ordering Your Private World." Just two points this morning and that is to become who you are, and, secondly, to become who you will be. Become who you are, and to become who you will be. First, let's look at verses 8-10. They say: "Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the 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: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law."

The chapters 12-16 of Romans all go together, and it begins by Paul saying: "Therefore, in view of God's mercies, offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God which is your reasonable," (paraphrasing) the only sane response to what God has done for you. And what that means, what you can summarize the whole message of Romans 1-11 or summarize the

gospel message like this—this is not original with me, but it could be summarized in this way: you are more *deeply flawed* than you feared, but you are more *wildly loved* than you ever dreamed. That's what the first 11 chapters are about, expressing the gospel. And so what follows after Romans 12:1 are various details, various expressions of what offering our bodies as living sacrifices to God in reaction to the mercies of God—that love extended to us, that's what God has made us to be in Him once we have been converted. And so, it is a matter of becoming who we are. We are deeply—if you've been converted, if you've trusted Christ alone and are trusting in Him as your personal Lord and Savior, you are more wildly loved than you ever imagined. And so, what God's call on our lives is to become what we are and who we already are in Him. So, the specifics of that here are to “owe no one anything, except to love one another.” The reason he says that, if you looked at the verse immediately before that, talking about how a believer relates to government he says: “Pay to all what you owe to them: taxes to whom taxes [are owed], revenue to whom revenue [is owed], respect to whom respect [is owed], honor to whom honor [is owed].” And so, using this image as an illustration he says in fact: “Owe no one anything except to love each other.”

Now, I've heard believers take that and say, *that means that the Bible says that you should never use credit of any sort in any circumstance*. But I can't find a single biblical scholar who believes that's what that means. That is, it's just an illustration. It does mean to be faithful to your promises, and to pay—when you do owe something, you should pay it back on time and do that the way you agreed to do it. But, ultimately, this is not about financial advice. Rather, he's talking about that you have one debt that's never-ending. No one will ever be able to say, *you know what? I've loved enough—that's enough. I have loved enough in this circumstance, and I am done*. That's not the way it works. That's a debt that we will never overcome. And he says we're to love one another. It's speaking of other believers, but that doesn't exclude strangers. That would contradict some of the things he said at the end of chapter 12 when he said: “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink...” He says those who love one another are *fulfilling* the Old Testament law. He's not saying they're doing away with the Old Testament law. He doesn't say that it doesn't matter, but when we act out of God's kind of love, where we love sacrificially for other people, that aims us toward the fulfilling of every part of the moral law of the Old Testament. Because genuine love seeks the absolute best for the one who's loved. So, he lists: adultery, murder, stealing, coveting. Love sums up all of that.

We're to love our neighbors as ourselves. But a couple of things have to be clarified. Love has been redefined in our time as if you love someone that means you just leave them alone to do whatever in the world they want to do as long as they're not hurting anyone else. But that's not the way love—even those who say that, that's not the way they respond. When someone that they love is involved in something that they believe is going to be destructive to them, they intervene, they tell them the truth, they try to persuade them to do otherwise. Love tells the truth to the one who is loved and seeks to rescue them and is willing to suffer for them. Love does no wrong to a neighbor.

A neighbor is forever defined in the New Testament by Jesus—in the parable of the Good Samaritan, which means your neighbor is anyone. *Anyone* with whom you can come in contact with. And so, we're called to love anyone we come in contact with.

When Paul says you're to "love your neighbor as yourself," he is not saying that you have to be able to love yourself, you have to be able to like yourself before you can love other people. When the Bible talks about loving others as you love yourself, it's not talking about a self-esteem thing. It's assuming that you *do* love yourself—if you're cold, you put on a coat; if you're hungry, you try to find something to eat; if you're in pain, you try to get away from that. Even those who try to harm themselves in some way are still trying to help themselves; they believe it's going to make themselves feel better. So, it's not about self-esteem.

You and I are more greatly flawed than we feared, more deeply loved than we dreamed. The only logical response to that is to offer our bodies as living sacrifice. And that means—one particular of that means that we love God's people. Those who know the love of Jesus are to be conduits of that love. We're to be amazed by Him and to worship Him for what He's done, and in the doing of that, it makes us to be more like Him—that is *who you are*.

One day this week our van died, wouldn't start. Kind of an embarrassing situation where we were in traffic, and we were holding people up. And we had to, we had to get some people to help us push the car out of the way. And so, those who know me pretty well will find this somewhat humorous, but I decided that I would look up some YouTube videos on how to fix a starter on a car. And, if you don't know me, I'm not mechanical. And so, but I decided I should try; I shouldn't give up on this. I'm a reasonably intelligent person—maybe I can figure this out. And so, I watched a couple of YouTube videos on how to fix a starter, and the guy was going *way* too fast for me. I didn't understand a lot of what he said, but there were some words in there about brushes and connections. And one thing I learned, though, is that once you get in there—if you can figure that out and get to where the starter is—it still looks like a starter, and parts of it can continue to work, but if every part of it doesn't work, it's no good. A starter is supposed to start—that's its purpose. A car is supposed to move, and it's not supposed to embarrass you in front of people. It is supposed to take you from point A to point B—that's what it's to do. And no matter how much it looks like it works, no matter how much it looks good, no matter how many pieces are in place, it's still not doing what it's supposed to do.

We are called to *love*, and to love the way Jesus loved, to love sacrificially. And so, if I'm having an obedience problem, if I'm having an anger problem toward someone else, I don't have an anger problem, I don't have an obedience problem. I have a *love* problem. Because if you love someone, you will not gossip about them. If you love someone, you won't ignore them; you'll be grateful to see them. If someone you love who is sick, you'll want to go see them and want to find a way to care for them, to take a meal to them. If you love someone who is poor, you're going to be concerned about their needs and try to find a way to help. If you love someone that's caught up in a practice that you believe is going to be destructive to them or to other people, you tell them the truth.

There are growing percentages of people in this country who think that what we're trying to do is to force our beliefs on them, through political power if necessary. And we're not unconcerned about politics and our relationship to government; we talked about that last week, and elder Gene Youngblood's going to share a class tonight that gets into that further right after the town hall—love for you to be a part of that. But until we learn to worship well the one who laid down His privilege and power and suffer for other people, that is not going to change the trends that are

going on in this country. Worshipping Jesus for who He is provokes His character in us. We're not trying to impose our values on the world; we're called to suffer for those—even those who would want us to go away. That's exactly what Jesus did. He was hunted, arrested, tried, and crucified—not out of *weakness*, but out of *strength*, and out of *power*, and out of *choice* to honor God and to express love for you.

So, there's two ways that we do this. We reflect, and we pray. See, when Paul says that the, that love fulfills the law, he doesn't mean that the particulars of the Old Testament law or the particulars of anything in the New Testament doesn't matter. That's what he says in Romans 12:2. He says: "Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may be able to attest and approve what God's will is." So, unless you have an intentional process to take in the word of God *daily* and reflect on it in your life, you will be conformed to the pattern of this world, and, ultimately, you will become one of these statistics. You will attend less. You'll serve less. You'll give less. You'll love less, and your children are likely to become **nones**—those (mark on a demographic form) *I don't really have any particular interest (in religion)*, and your grandchildren will be ignorant of Jesus.

We have got to get—we've got to think straight about this, but we also have to pray. One of the things you can pray is what Paul says in Philippians 1:9-11: "It is my prayer," Paul says. "...that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may be able to prove what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God."

So, becoming who you are looks back to what Jesus has done and the implications for your life. But now, we're going to look *forward* to what you *will be* when you stand before Jesus face to face. Become who you will be. Look at verses 11-14. Paul says: "Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires."

Paul says, *you know what time it is*, and he just expects them to know what he's talking about. There's a nuance in Greek that we wouldn't necessarily get here, but they use two different words for time. *Chronos* is *it's eleven o'clock in the morning*. It's a specific time. It's about the passing of seconds, and minutes, and hours. But the word that's used here is *kairos*, which has no exact equivalent in English, but it speaks to the appropriate time; it speaks to the season. So, it's not talking about that it's eleven a.m. but it's fall, so it's football season. And it's cold, or usually would be colder except for today. Or, your blood pressure is high, so it's time to take some action to do something about that. It's time to act, or it's time to go to sleep. So, Paul says, *it's time to wake from sleep*. And so, he's not saying it's six a.m. in the morning; he's saying that the spiritual need of the moment is that you've got to be alert to spiritual realities. That's why that report and that conversation with my friend did exactly this for me. It made me more alert to recognize that every person that I see is a person who will live forever in Heaven or Hell, and that *everything* that you and I do with every resource that we have, be it time or energy or attention has eternal significance. *Everything* that you do matters.

But what really got me about this text is the simple phrase that says *your salvation is nearer now than when you first believed*. And here's where I went as I reflected on this text over the course of this week. One thing, and I, I haven't said this in years—I don't know that I've ever said this from this pulpit, but it's a basic point of theology: when the New Testament talks about salvation, there is a past, present, and future aspect to that. If you are saved, if you've been converted, at the moment of conversion you were made—and the theological word is *justification*—you were made *blameless* in the sight of God, so that if you were to die at that moment, you would be ushered straight into Heaven. You *were* saved. You were made right. You were made whole on the inside before God, but there's a sense also in which you are *being* saved. And that is the process of *sanctification*, or the process of maturing spiritually. And that also you cannot do alone, you do it in cooperation with a local body of believers and through a set of specific practices that help you to grow spiritually. But what he's alluding to in this text is that in the end, when you stand before Jesus, your salvation is nearer now than when you first believed. He's not just saying that some time has passed, some days and weeks and months and years have passed since you were saved, but that rather the moment when you're going to see Jesus face to face and be made whole and complete in actuality, in practice, that day is coming soon. It means what John said in I John chapter 3, verses 2 and 3 when he said: "Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when He appears we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him as He is. And everyone who thus hopes in Him purifies himself as He is pure." That's why worship makes us more like Jesus. When we see Him face to face as He is, that will be transformative (for) us, and we'll be completely saved and made like Him in that moment. But in the meantime, as we see Him, as we worship Him genuinely, as we engage in the practices that shape us into God's character, that changes us.

So what Paul is saying in this simple little phrase here and motivating them, he's saying *your salvation—the moment that you see Jesus face-to-face—is closer*. This is what that means. You will—there's coming a day sooner when you'll no longer have to worry about memories of sin that haunt you, that even though you know you're forgiven, you still grieve over them. You'll no longer be tormented by the agonies of anxiety or depression. You'll no longer be prone to bursts of anger, or prideful attitudes, or saying the wrong thing. You'll no longer suffer self-doubt and insecurities. You'll no longer be fighting off feelings of loneliness and the lies of Satan that you don't belong. You'll no longer struggle with feeling empty or wrestle with a job for which you sense that has no purpose. That day is coming.

And so, here's the way this works. I'm a bit of a productivity junkie. I like to read books, and I like to try apps that are supposedly going to help me get more things done and get the right things done. The problem with a lot of those things is you can collect more and more and more tasks so that you can get paralyzed. It's like *I got so many things to do; it says it right here: there's 500 tasks in my task list*. That you've got so many things to do that you're paralyzed. The point of this text is not *man, you got a lot to do. You need to wake up, and be alert, and get busy*. That's not it at all. The point of the text is *you're going to see Jesus soon. The finish line is close*. It's a little more like the difference in *ugh, I got to go home and clean the house and I've got to go home and pack because I'm going to Disney tomorrow, or I'm going skiing tomorrow, or I'm going on a missions trip tomorrow, or I'm going on my honeymoon tomorrow*—whatever you

think would be insanely exciting. It's a completely different set of motivations as to why you would do what you would do.

And so, he says, with all that in mind, look at verses 12, and 13, and 14 again: "The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires." He's making a point here that sinful actions—not exclusively, but many sinful actions tend to happen at night. And so, night is used as a spiritual darkness image. So, he says: "let us walk properly," and walk is an image for how you live in the New Testament. "Walk properly as in the daytime," which means to focus on Jesus and what he has done, and [is] doing, and will immediately do. And then it lists, it says we're to set aside the works of darkness, and he lists some of them in three pairs. The first two are the kind of things that, you know, traditionalists would say, *you go get 'em, preacher. That's good preaching. You stay after them.* But then, but then he throws in there are these sexual sins, and then, but he throws in, in the same list, quarreling and jealousy which we have a tendency to believe are more respectable sins—it's *ok if someone is caught up in that; they're just struggling.* The Holy Spirit puts them all in the same bucket and calls them all works of darkness. And so, then he uses this image that we're to take off the clothes—as if it were changing clothes, we're to put off the works of darkness and to make no provision for the flesh. And there needs to be practical steps on how you do this. You know whether or not you got dressed this morning and so does everyone else. [Crowd responding.] Thank you. [Crowd laughter.]

So, I apologize for this story in advance. I played football in high school and, when you're in full gear, you have to wear a t-shirt of some sort under your shoulder pads. It'd be really uncomfortable if you didn't. And so, football practice would start in August, so it was really hot. A bunch of older teen guys, and you can just kind of—after two hours in the sun, and you can just imagine the condition of that t-shirt. But, it's actually worse, it was worse than that because, we didn't care. We just hung those t-shirts up in our locker. We put that rascal back on the next day. It was nowhere near close to dry. (And we would) wear that same thing (to practice) all week. There's nothing quite like that smell. [Crowd laughter.] Listen, the only thing fit to do in that shirt, was to make it worse. It never occurred to us to go on a date in that t-shirt, or to go to school, or sleep, or go to worship. The only thing fit to do in that shirt was to make it worse, to continue in that pattern of activity.

The story's gross, but you get it. That is the kind of image that's to be, that we're to think of. What are you *wearing*? We're called to become who we will be, to use our imaginations, to focus our attentions on Jesus and what He is doing in us, and what He is causing us to become. We're to put on—there's an allusion there that's more fully explained—he says we're to put on the full armor of God that's explained in Ephesians 6:10-18, but we don't have time to take a look at that. We're to "offer [our] bodies as living sacrifice" to be "*transformed* by the renewing of [our] minds." And when we don't change, we don't change in large part because we have no serious intention to do that. We don't have, we don't engage in the specific practices that are going to cause that to come about. This country is moving further and further away from God, and that is going to be disastrous. The very impulse to protect the weak comes from Jesus, and the further that we get away—it won't happen immediately, but the further that we get away in

generations, it's going to be disastrous. The most important thing you can do for yourself and for this country, then, is to become who you are, and to become who you will be. The more we understand the mercies of God and worship Him, the more we become the type of person the world desperately needs. May we feel the urgency needed that we might faithfully follow. To put *off* the works of darkness and to put *on* the Lord Jesus Christ. It's time.

Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, I pray that your mercies will be more clear to every single person in the room this moment, that we would make the only sane response for those who have not understood that they're more deeply flawed than they'd ever imagined, but more wildly loved than they'd ever dreamed, that they would confess their sins to you in the first place, the first time this morning and reach out to you in faith to put on the Lord Jesus Christ in the first place. But, Father, for those who've already been converted, then I pray that they would seek to put an intentional practices in our lives of reflecting richly on your word and applying it to our lives, and I pray that (our) love may abound more and more that we might become who you already made us to be and to become who you will cause us to be fully when we see you face to face. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.