

**Romans 13:11-14 And do this since you understand the present time. It is already the hour for you to wake up from sleep, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. <sup>12</sup>The night is almost over, and the day is drawing near. So let us put away the deeds of darkness and put on the weapons of light. <sup>13</sup>Let us walk decently as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual sin and wild living, not in strife and jealousy. <sup>14</sup>Instead, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not give any thought to satisfying the desires of your sinful flesh.**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, dear brothers and sisters in Christ. It's about that time of year again — the lights and decorations are beginning to be hung around town. I remember in when we lived in Saginaw, the city would put up these lighted decorations on every other lamp post down M-46 that said "Joy." During this time of year we see similar decoration along with the words Peace, and Gloria. We say "*Merry Christmas,*" and "*Happy Holidays.*" But just seeing or saying these words, joy, peace, gloria, merry, happy, doesn't make it so. Just telling a person who is going through difficult times to be more joyful doesn't help. For many the holidays aren't as happy as they are for others. In this sinful world, things happen, even around Christmas — or even on Christmas.

Today as we *finally* begin the season of Advent, focusing our hearts on Christ's coming at Christmas, Paul reminds us what makes the seasons of Advent and Christmas so full of joy and peace — why *everyone* can have a measure of happiness and be merry. It comes not from those familiar holiday words we see all over town, but from a different word — the Word made flesh — Jesus.

Paul begins our text by saying, "***And do this since you understand the present time.***" Do *what*, exactly? In the verses immediately before our text he's talking about showing love to our neighbor. He said, "**Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law. <sup>9</sup> The commandments...are summed up in this one rule: "Love your neighbor as yourself."**

Then, in our text, he lists why showing love to our neighbor is so hard in this world. It starts with our sinful nature. **Let us walk decently**, Paul said. A decent human being looks out for his neighbor and doesn't only think of himself. But our sinful nature is not a decent human being. It would rather be found immersed in **carousing and drunkenness, sexual**

**sins and wild living, strife and jealousy** — any and every sin that serves me first. In short, Paul is summing up how each of us is by nature, turning Jesus' command to love our neighbor as ourself to "love our neighbor only as much as our neighbor loves us — every man for himself."

We see it all over our world, in our society, and in our own hearts too. Me first, my time, my opinions, my ideas, my way. And our actions, not only to our neighbor, but at times to friends, family, and even our spouses follow that line and first ask the question, "What's in it for me?"

This sin is the opposite of love, isn't it? The opposite of what God intended for his creation from the beginning, showing how by nature we are separated from God. And if we keep feeding our sinful flesh, giving it more and more rope in its carousing and drunkenness, in its sexual sins and wild living, as it consumes every relationship with everyone and everything in selfish strife and jealousy, that's how we will end up for all eternity — separated from God in hell with only me, myself, and I to blame. So Paul encourages us strongly, using words of our Savior himself, "**Love your neighbor as yourself.**"

But did you notice, the word "love," that thing that Jesus commanded and Paul is trying to get us to show our neighbor — his goal for us and our faith — it doesn't appear anywhere in our text?

He doesn't say, "Love your neighbor and now do that by going and doing more loving things. Go show more love. Go out there and show love to five people this week, ten the week after that, and so on." He doesn't even say "Put on love, clothe yourself in love." Instead he directs us to the source of that love. He says, "Clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ."

Because he's not just trying to change our actions or make us appear more loving to most people. As loving as we can appear to most people, or even all people, we can't hide the truth of our sinful selfishness from God.

So as we begin this Season of Advent, at least for the moment, forget about what *you* need to do. Forget about how *you* should be living. And that may sound counter productive. God says through Paul that we are to love one another. That was the new command Jesus gave his disciples after he rose from the dead — love one another! But we're not supposed to focus on ourselves? Exactly! Clothe yourselves with Christ. Focus on him. It's the only way to arrive at the true love, joy and peace of this season, and of our lives as Christians.

Clothing yourselves with Christ means seeing Jesus as your Savior, which means understanding how much you need Jesus as your Savior. **No good thing lives in us, that is, in our sinful nature.** We cannot please God no matter how hard we try. Because of our sins, we don't deserve peace and joy, with each other, but especially with God. On our own, without Jesus, we are lost, hopelessly destined for the fires of hell. **The wages of sin is death.**

Clothing yourselves with Christ also means understanding what Jesus did for you. On that first Christmas God gave the world the greatest gift no one ever could have imagined — his one and only Son. The Son of God came into this world as a little baby for two purposes — to live under God's law and to suffer and die under God's wrath. He lived under God's law perfectly, upholding it for all the times we would not. He died under God's wrath that was meant for us — for our sins he went to the cross and paid their price, our punishment, in full.

Clothing yourselves with Christ means understanding that because Jesus accomplished those two purposes in this world and on that cross, we are right with God. All the strife and discord that existed between us and him has been settled. We have true peace on earth, God's good will toward men.

Finally, clothing yourselves with Christ means first understanding God's love for us — that while we were still sinners God chose to send his Son. He gave up his Son for us. He said, "I'm not going to punish sinners for their sins. I'm going to punish my Son instead." When we understand that, when the Holy Spirit instills in us faith in how much God loves us, that we are right with him, that our sins are paid for, that because he lives we too will live — then, loving our neighbor isn't something we will even have to think about. Clothed in Christ it will just come naturally.

That's the beauty of what Paul is teaching us here today. We could put on love and the world would seem like a better place. But *our* love is fickle, it's based on *me* and what *I* get from it. The moment I'm not satisfied, love retreats. I can suddenly not feel so loving anymore. With only worldly love, the world will never be a better place.

Christ's love is different. It was all about the *object* of his love — you and me, the world, and not about himself.

Clothed in Christ, it has nothing to do with me. Clothed with Christ, in the face of sins against me, love prevails with the words, I forgive you.

Clothed in Christ, in the face of heartbreak, pain, or loss, the treasures

Jesus won for you on the cross and in the tomb are still yours, and will never be taken away.

Sometimes though, our focus gets shifted and the fruits of our faith are not so evident — especially in the weeks leading up to Christmas. What can we do so that we aren't distracted away from the true reason for the season? Paul said, **So let us put away the deeds of darkness and put on the weapons of light.** What are the weapons of light? The Words of our Savior and all he has done for us. Time in the Word, here in Church. Receiving the Sacraments, the goal of all Jesus came into this world at Christmas to do — give his body and shed his blood for you, for the forgiveness of all our sins.

This Advent, clothe yourself with Christ. Keep the focus on him and your salvation through him and all these words we see throughout the season like joy, peace, gloria!, merry, happy — we'll know what they're rooted in: joy in knowing God loves you and took care of your greatest need, greater than any loss, pain, or grief you have suffered or will suffer in this life. Peace knowing that you are right with God, your future with him in heaven is secure, and he will be with you and bless you until he takes you there. That's news that makes us merry and happy, even if we don't always show it. Deep down, it's there.

The spirit of Christmas — we see it in lots of movies this time of year, the world trying to put its spin on Christmas, usually without Christ. A vague sense of joy and happiness, but never getting to the heart of the truth of the matter. Clothed with Christ, we're already there, ready for our Savior's birth. And so may our time spent in the word together, now over the next 2 Sundays, be a blessing to us as we wait for Jesus' coming at Christmas, throughout this new church year, and until his return on the last day. In Jesus' name, amen!