

“You Know What Time It Is”

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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.

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. (Romans 13:8-14)

The image Paul uses at the end of this passage is one of the most relatable, vivid, and powerful metaphors in the New Testament. The idea of “putting on Christ” as one would a clean robe or garment has captured the imagination of many a saint through the ages. The young mystic Catherine of Siena was one of them. Reading this passage from Romans, she heeded the call to “*lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light*,” picturing her soul removing the dirty rags of sin and selfishness and replacing them with new, pristine clothing. “*I shall strip myself of my stinking garment*,” she promised God, “*and by the light of most holy faith I shall... clothe myself in your eternal will.*”¹

Now, let me just say that Catherine of Siena was known for being one of the kindest, gentlest, and most generous people who ever lived. She gladly took on difficult, unpleasant tasks that even other nuns avoided. She gave up her own food for others. She cared for people with leprosy and plague. From a spiritual perspective, what she would call “stinking garments” would seem pretty fresh and clean to most people.

When I think of a “stinking garment,” one image that comes to my mind is a commercial fisherman who’s been at sea for days on end. Eighteen hour days of backbreaking work in the summer sun... no time for a shower... baiting hooks... ladling buckets of chum into the water... hauling in heavy wet nets. Imagine what gets baked into your clothes – old fish guts, slime, stale sweat, fumes from the diesel engine. After a while, the dampness starts to breed mildew, because who has time to dry off? Now that is a “stinking garment.”

And that is the way a much older saint, Augustine of Hippo, saw his spiritual wardrobe. As a young person, Augustine ran pretty wild. He was a huge partier, womanizer, even at times a thief. He pretty much did whatever he wanted to do, whenever he wanted to do it. And it was great fun. Until it wasn’t. Until he realized that the life he was living – a life that focused on self-gratification, pride, and vanity – was leaving him empty. He knew he needed to change eventually, but he couldn’t bring himself to quit his bad habits. “Oh God,” he would pray, “grant me chastity and self-control... but not yet.”

¹ Catherine of Siena, “Your Greatness is Everywhere,” printed in O’Driscoll at p. 71.



His breakthrough moment actually came from the same scripture we read this morning. Consumed with guilt, he came to a moment of crisis. "I flung myself down... under a fig-tree," he wrote, "giving free course to my tears... and the streams of my eyes gushed out... I sent up these sorrowful cries — 'How long, how long? Tomorrow, and tomorrow? Why not now? Why is there not at this very hour an end to my uncleanness?'"

"I was saying these things and weeping in the most bitter contrition of my heart," Augustine continued, "when, lo, I heard the voice a boy or girl, I know not which, coming from a neighboring house, chanting, and repeating, 'Take up and read; take up and read.'"

That was weird, he thought. Why would kids be saying that? It wasn't part of any childhood game he knew of. He realized this must be some kind of sign, a directive from God. "Take up and read; take up and read."

And then, in an instant, he remembered the book he had last been reading -- a book of the letters of Paul. He ran back home and grabbed the book. Somehow, he knew that he should close his eyes, open the book, put a finger blindly down and then read whatever it said. Have you ever done something like that -- letting fate or God or blind fool luck determine the message you will receive?

"In silence," Augustine continued, "I read that paragraph on which my eyes first fell — '*Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying; but put on the Lord Jesus Christ [as like a garment], and make no provision for the flesh or the gratification of your desires.*' The very same text we read just minutes ago.

"I had no wish to read further," Augustine concludes, "nor was there need. No sooner had I reached the end of the verse than the light of certainty flooded my heart and all dark shades of doubt fled away."² In that moment, Augustine, without hesitation or grief or reluctance, shed the stinking garments of his old life of sin and put on the garment of Christ.

I think we can all relate to Augustine's spiritual struggle in some way. The metaphor of clothing is easy enough to understand. It is a routine of life -- the need to change out of old clothes and put on fresh ones. It is not just necessary; it makes us feel better. This is not hard to understand, but it can still be hard to do. Physical clothes are one thing; spiritual discipline is another.

I think that is why another aspect of this passage rose to the surface as this sermon took shape. We know what Paul is urging -- changing our spiritual clothes. And we know it has to do with the choices we make, the priorities we adopt. I get the WHAT. But for Paul the focus was the WHEN. That was the struggle for Augustine, as he wrestled with God. "How long? When will I be clean again? Will it be today, tomorrow?

And don't you know God, though always loving, was beginning to get a bit exasperated with Augustine? "Just read what you have been reading," was the message back. "Pick it up and read it. Again."

And don't you know that God gets a bit exasperated with us... when we pray, "Lord, I want to be better... but not yet. I know there are aspects of my life that are not loving... that are not kind... that are not good. I want to live a more righteous life... but not today."

And that brings me to the line that shouts from the page in the book we are reading today... which just happens to be the same book Augustine was reading: "*You know what time it is.*" Don't pretend you don't know what you need to do, because you know. Don't act like you are trying to figure out the best time to fix what's broken, because you know what

² Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, Book VIII, Chapter 12.

time it is. “Now,” the scripture says. “Wake up! Now is the time to wake from sleep. Now is the time to shed what needs to be shed... to get rid of the dirty laundry and put on the armor of light.”

I grew up with an old saying... maybe you’ve heard it, maybe you haven’t... it’s “hemmin’ and hawin’.” If you are fretting unnecessarily over a decision that you just need to go on and make, you’re hemmin’ and hawin’. That’s what the Romans were doing, it’s what Augustine was doing, and it is certainly what we tend to do when it comes to living the kind of lives we know God is calling us to lead. We hesitate to make the changes we need to make, because change can be hard. So we debate with God and with ourselves about the right time to make the change. But this passage says we cannot afford do that anymore. Some translations capture the urgency and immediacy of this call to action even better – they say “it is high time for us to wake from sleep.” In other words, we should have done this a long time ago. We are long overdue for a good wardrobe change.

This passage is not hard to understand. We all have some stains on our spiritual clothing. We know this. And we all know that God is calling us to get rid of those stinking garments and trade them in for something better. But we hem and we haw about when. We know what time it is. It is high time that we get on with it. So may God give us the courage and the will to face what needs to be faced, to stand with what is right, do what needs to be done. ***Amen.***