

Putting Off and Putting On

by Linda Rex

September 10, 2023, Proper 18 / After Pentecost—What's your early morning routine? Do you stumble out of bed, straight into the shower? Or do you grope your way into the kitchen and grab a cup of coffee before you start your day? Or do you groan, push the snooze button on the alarm clock and roll over to catch some more zzz's?

It is interesting that the apostle Paul, in Romans 13:8–14, uses the images of night and day, sleep and awakening, bedclothes and work clothes, in his description of how we are to be living out our lives as those who are alive from the dead in Christ. His use of these contrasts gives us a vivid picture of the difference between living life in the kingdom of God or continuing to sleep in the darkness of unbelief and disobedience.

The context of this discussion, though, is God's love expressed to us and through us in Christ by the Spirit. God's love was poured out in the sacrificial self-offering of Jesus and in the giving of God's Spirit, so that we all might be participants by faith in the union and communion of Father, Son, and Spirit. God first loved us, tremendously and mightily, and so, we love one another as he has first loved us. What does love look like? It looks a lot like Jesus Christ, who laid down his life for us, and who, today, gives his life to us in and through the Holy Spirit.

This is why Paul says that the law is fulfilled as we love our neighbor as ourself. What does this look like? We can find a description in the laws of the covenant (Ex. 20; Deut. 5), and in the many descriptions given in the epistles in the New Testament. We look at Jesus, and we see the embodiment and fulfillment of the law—for he lived it out as no other human has or could. When we look around and look at ourselves, we fail to see this kind of love being lived out or expressed in such powerful and self-sacrificial ways. But this kind of love is what we were created for—to love God with our whole heart, soul, mind, and being, and to love our neighbor as ourself.

For this reason, Paul instructs us to “put on Christ.” Putting on Christ has the sense of being what someone does when they arise from bed in the morning, take off their pajamas, and get dressed in their work clothes, ready for whatever they may face in the day. The night is over, Paul reminds us—Christ has come and fought the battle against evil, sin, and death, and won. The day has dawned in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, so we live in a new day. We put on the armor of light, an expression Paul liked to use to describe the process of putting on Christ, who is the Light (1 Thess. 5:8; 2 Cor. 6:7; Rom. 6:13; Eph. 6:13ff). This armor, Jesus Christ, is essential to our new life in Christ. We cannot live in the truth of who we are in Christ apart from Jesus living this life in and through us by his indwelling Holy Spirit.

In Ephesians 6:13–20, Paul describes the armor of God. If we prayerfully consider what he says there, we will realize that Paul is telling us to put on Christ. For example, the helmet of salvation is Jesus, who is our salvation. The breastplate of righteousness is Jesus, who is our right relationship with God. The belt of truth is Jesus, who is the way, the truth, and the life (not to mention our Father the God of truth, and the Spirit of truth). The shield of faith is Jesus, who is the One with complete trust in his Father and whose belief in us has never wavered, even when it cost him his life. And the shoes of the gospel of peace—the gospel and our peace being Jesus, in his life, death, resurrection, and ascension.

In Gal. 3:27, Paul writes, “For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ” (NASB). We actively participate in our immersion in Christ by the practice of baptism, a one-time event showing our inclusion in Jesus' death and resurrection. Being baptized is a tangible way we put on Christ, just as taking communion regularly is another way we “put

on” Christ. And living in the truth of who we are in Christ—living in the “light” or the “day” where we practice Christlike ways of caring for ourselves and others in the way God means us to is another way we “put on Christ”. Our focus and attention are on Jesus Christ, on loving God and others (our risen-in-Christ life), and not on self-centered, self-willed ways of living or fulfilling the sensual desires of our flesh (which all died when Jesus died).

As we begin and end each day, we may want to attend to the spiritual realities by pulling our attention away from the things of our dead-in-Christ flesh, and concentrate on putting on the new-life-in-Christ ways of living and thinking. We can do this by spending time alone with our Lord, being focused on him, and by practicing spiritual disciplines such as prayer, listening, meditation, silence, study of God’s Word, worship, and contemplation to open ourselves up to his Spirit’s inner work. We live each day awake and fully alive, dressed in the armor of light and the robe of righteousness given to us by God through Christ in his Spirit. As we practice putting on Christ, we also are diligent to fulfill our obligation to love others, for as we practice other-centered Christlike ways of loving, giving, and serving others, we begin to live even now in the already-not-yet reality of the kingdom of God.

Heavenly Father, thank you for loving us and so generously giving us your Son and your Spirit. Thank you, Jesus, for clothing us with yourself and including us in your own life with our Father in the Spirit. Thank you for filling us with your love, and causing it to flow from us to others. Grant us the grace to wake up from our slumber, to live alert and alive each day to your life flowing in and through us by your Spirit. Amen.

“Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law. The commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery,’ ‘You shall not murder,’ ‘You shall not steal,’ ‘You shall not covet,’ and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law. And do this, understanding the present time: The hour has already 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. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh.” Romans 13:8–14 NIV

“Remain debt free; the only thing we owe the world is our love. This is the essence of the law. Love makes it impossible for you to commit adultery, or to kill someone, or to steal from someone, speak evil of anyone, or to covet anything that belongs to someone else. Your only option is to esteem a fellow human with equal value to yourself. Everything love does is to the advantage of another; therefore, love is the most complete expression of what the law requires. You must understand the urgency and context of time; it is most certainly now the hour to wake up at once out of the hypnotic state of slumber and unbelief. Salvation has come. It was night for long enough; the day has arrived. Cease immediately with any action associated with the darkness of ignorance. Clothe yourself in the radiance of light as a soldier would wear his full weaponry. Our lives exhibit the kind of conduct consistent with the day, in contrast to the parade of the night of intoxicated licentiousness and lust, with all the quarrels and jealousy it ignites.” Romans 13:8–14 Mirror