

THE NIGHT IS NEARLY OVER

by Ray C. Stedman

I am sure that many of you feel like I do about Easter. I love Easter -- the triumphal notes of the music, the joy it expresses. I love the hope for which Easter stands, and even the time of year in which it comes, with the beauty of the springtime flowers around us. I always look forward to Easter. Even though I have sung the hymns nine times over this morning, I still love and enjoy them. But I never go through an Easter without feeling, at the end of each year, that something has been missing. Some great truth has remained unexpressed. Somehow or other we focus on some of the great and well-known themes of Easter and miss this one which, in many ways, I think, is the greatest note of all in the Easter Message.

I rejoice with you in singing that Jesus is alive again. The very thought that he survived the grave, that he came back from death, is an encouraging thought, and we rightly celebrate that all through this Easter season. And I rejoice with you that we therefore have a hope beyond the grave, that when we come to the end of life and stand at the river of death, we can hear Jesus' words, "Because I live, you shall live also," {cf, John 14:19}. We can cry with the Apostle Paul, "O death, where is your sting? O grave, where is your victory?" {cf, 1 Cor 15:55 KJV}. That is part of the triumphant message of Easter. I rejoice also that truth will surely live; that evil will not triumph ultimately, but God's goodness and truth shall reign throughout the earth. But it seems to me that the true glory of this Easter message, the greatest message that this day can have for us, is to remind us that in the risen Lord Jesus we have an endless supply of power to love. That is what Easter is all about -- the fact that we have an ability to love. Love is the greatest need of the world today. I don't think I have to argue that point with you.

When Paul wrote this letter to the Romans in the capital city of the Roman Empire, surely love was the thing that was most lacking in that empire. These people, under the subjugation of a military machine and a cruel, relentless emperor, needed desperately to learn how to love and how to display love amidst the pressure and oppression of that day. This was what was needed in the city of Corinth, with all its immoral sexual practices and its abandonment to pleasure, the city from which Paul wrote the letter to the Romans. In the midst of seeking after merriment and pleasure the Corinthians needed to learn the gift of love. Love is what is needed in Palo Alto, Menlo Park, Mountain View, Los Altos, and Sunnyvale, all up and down the Peninsula, across the Bay, across the country, and around the world. The greatest need of men anywhere today is to learn the secret of how to love. Love would make a difference. Listen to what Paul says to these Romans in Chapter 13, Verses 8-10:

Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellow man has fulfilled the law. The commandments, "Do not commit adultery," "Do not murder," "Do not steal," "Do not covet," and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law. {Rom 13:8-10 NIV}

Have you ever struggled to obey the Ten Commandments? Have you found it difficult to face up to obeying these demands that you shall not murder or lie or steal or commit adultery? Well, Paul says it is really easy. All you have to do is love. Act in love toward people and you won't hurt them. You can't. The solution to all the problems we struggle with is this one thing. Have you ever thought of what would happen in this world if people could be taught how to love -- and then they did it?

The first result that occurs to me is that all the impending divorces would be happily resolved. Couples ready to split up because love has left their marriage could go back together and learn how to work it out. It wouldn't automatically solve all their problems, but it would make possible their solution. And think what would happen if all the divorces that this country is facing today would suddenly cease to be, and homes and families would be secure. What a tremendous thing that would be in this country!

If we could teach people how to love we wouldn't fight in wars. We wouldn't have to worry about disarmament. We could send the atom bombs and nuclear explosives and missiles off into space somewhere and let them join the rest of the space garbage. What a remarkable thing that would be! Think of how much energy and money is being expended in keeping up this endless array of armaments simply because we can't trust people to love each other. That is the whole problem.

If we could love each other, there wouldn't be any more crime. The streets of San Francisco would be safe to walk once more, and in all the great cities of our land you would feel safe and secure -- if people would learn to love. Of course, if there weren't any crime, you wouldn't need any prisons. All the money we spend on prisons and reformatories could be spent on something more useful. And you wouldn't need any courts of law, or police -- except to regulate traffic a little bit now and then. We need all these things because we are so deprived in this ability to love. And think what would happen to our tax burden if we could get rid of all wars and crimes and police and courts! It would be reduced to practically nothing! All the wealth that is poured into taxes today could be used to spread beauty and harmony and sufficiency of living to everybody on earth. Our biggest problem is our lack of love, our inability to love one another. Everything we know in life revolves around that problem.

This passage is telling us that the ability to love -- that and nothing less than that -- is the radical force that Jesus Christ has turned loose in this world by his resurrection. Therefore it has the power to radically change the world. Notice what Paul says about this to these Roman Christians.

He implies that this has to start with us. If we are Christians, if we know Jesus Christ, we have the power to love. There is no doubt about that. If you know him, then you have the power to love. You don't have to ask for it; you've got it. If you have Christ, you have the ability to act in love, even though you are tempted not to. That is the whole issue.

Therefore, Paul says, when you come up against people, when you rub shoulders with them, remember that your first obligation is to love them. Act in love. Show courtesy, kindness, patience, understanding, longsuffering -- whatever it takes, whatever the scene demands, you can show that. It is a debt you owe that person. That is the first thing Paul says: "Owe no man anything but to love one another." Paul says very plainly that we are to think of this as our obligation to everyone.

I wonder what kind of radical things would start happening among us if we were to start living on this basis. Every day, every person we would meet, we would say to ourselves first, "I need to show some love to this person. No matter what else happens, I have an obligation to pay him that debt."

I have owed money to people in my life, and I have noticed that whenever I meet people I owe money to, that is the first thing that comes into my mind. I remember the debt that I owe them, and I wonder if that is what they are thinking about too. This is what Paul says we are to do about love. We are to remember that we have an obligation to every man -- to love him.

The second thing Paul says is that this obligation is to everyone. This is designed for your neighbor. Who is your neighbor? You think immediately of the people who live on each side of you. They are your neighbors. Why? Because they live next door to you. They are in contact with you. When you hear the word *neighbor* you think of them. But you can see that it really includes everyone. The people sitting next to you now are your neighbors. And so are the people you meet in business, and in your shopping. Wherever you are, the people you make contact with are living right beside you and are your neighbors for that moment. The word to us is that, since we have the ability to love, we are to love our neighbor as ourselves. The butcher, the baker, the cadillac maker -- it doesn't make any difference, they are your neighbors.

The third thing Paul says is that, when you love like this, you go beyond the Law. The Law says to you, "Don't injure your neighbor." You can do what you like with your own property, but it stops at your neighbor's line. You can't do what you like with his. If you do, you are answerable to the law. But you see, love goes a step beyond that. It doesn't stop with the negative, "Don't injure your neighbor"; it says, "Do good to your neighbor." Love him, reach out to him, minister to him, help him. It is simply impossible to help your

neighbor and hurt him at the same time. It is impossible to reach out to your neighbor and, at the same time, injure him.

That is why, as Paul says, love will not sleep with your neighbor's wife or husband; love won't commit adultery. Love will not murder your neighbor, or poison his dog, or throw garbage over the fence into his back yard, or do anything harmful to him. Love will not steal from your neighbor, or even keep his lawn mower for more than a month. Love will not covet what is your neighbor's, it won't drool over his pool, or stew about his new Porsche. Love does not want what your neighbor has, but rejoices with him over what he has. That is love. Love, therefore, fulfills the Law. You don't have to worry about keeping the Ten Commandments; all you have to worry about is acting in love, paying the debt that you owe every man, every woman, every child, every person you meet. If you pay them the debt of love you will not injure them.

Furthermore, Paul says (Verses 11-14):

And do this, understanding the present time. The hour has 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 orgies 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 your sinful nature. {Rom 13:11-14 NIV}

The thing that strikes me about this paragraph is the opening words. Love your neighbor, Paul says, pay the debt you owe him, understanding the time. That is, there is something about the age in which we live which, if you understand it, will compel you, motivate you, drive you to love your neighbor. If you understand the times, you will be able to do this. There are three things Paul points out about the times.

First, he says it is time to get going: "The hour has 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." It is time to wake up, time to get going, time to look around and see all the opportunities to love that abound around you.

I am amazed to see how many times in my own life I pass over the opportunity to love. I am always looking for opportunities with other people out there, further away. And yet I am surrounded in my own family with opportunities to show love, even when it is difficult. It is to love the unlovely that Christians are called. I am always amazed by how easily people can want to help somebody further away and yet ignore the present needs right around them.

A couple brought some clothes down to the church one day to take to the Rescue Mission. The lady was very concerned about the poor people's need for proper clothing. But I noticed that her husband had to hold his pants up with a nail. It struck me as very strange that people can get so concerned about helping others when there is such an obvious need right at hand. But that's the way we are, isn't it? Paul is telling us to wake up and to look around, because every day holds opportunities for us to pay this debt. If we wake up we can begin to see them.

Now, we don't have a lot of time to do this. The time is short. As Paul puts it, "our salvation is nearer than when we first believed." That is, the deliverance to which we are looking, when Christ returns again, is nearer than when we first believed. No one can argue with that. The Christian message has been going for 1900 years -- but how much nearer we have grown to the time when Christ is coming back! There is no doubt about that. "The night is nearly over," Paul says, "the day is almost here." On one occasion Jesus said, "I must work the works of my Father while it is day. The night is coming, when no man can work," {cf, John 9:4}. Jesus was aware of the urgency of the time, and the fact that he had to labor because the day was almost gone. On another occasion he said, "As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world," {John 9:5 KJV}. That is what created the day. When Jesus was present on earth, then it was daytime. But when he left us physically, when he was buried in the grave, the night came. That night has been running on now for 1900 years. As the Apostle Paul tells us in his letter to the Colossians, "We Christians are to be like lights shining in the darkness

of the night," {cf, Phil 2:15}. The night is all around us, but the day is about to come. The night is nearly over; the day is at hand.

You say, "Wait a minute. Paul wrote this letter 1900 years ago, and he said it was nearly over then. How can we say that it is nearly over now? How could it be nearly over then, when 1900 years have gone by?" When you look at it from that point of view, it is difficult to understand. But there is a sense here in which these words are always true of every one of us. I am sure this is the way the apostle meant them for himself. Regardless of whether or not this is the generation in which Jesus Christ returns to fulfill his promise, the truth is that the night is nearly over for every one of us.

I look out on this congregation and I see several gray heads. I have a few gray hairs myself. And, for us, the night is nearly over; the day is at hand. If we are ever going to love, it has to be now. We can't wait much longer. But how about you young people, fresh and strong and filled with excitement and energy?

I often think of the words of George Bernard Shaw, "Youth is such a wonderful thing, it's a shame to waste it on the young."

But let me ask you young people, "How much time have you got left?" Who knows? We live on the edge of eternity. The night may be nearly over for any one of us, no matter whether we are old or young.

So the argument of the apostle is powerful. He is saying, "If you are going to love, **now** is the time to do it. **Now!** You can't wait for tomorrow. You can't plan on doing this after you graduate from school. Start now. Now you must begin to love one another. "The night is nearly over; the day is at hand."

The second thing we need to understand about time is that it is time to give up some things: "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 orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy." If you are going to live in love, then there are some things that are going to have to go. There are some things that are incompatible with love. You can't do these things and love at the same time. Facing that fact, there are some things that have to go, and Paul has three categories of them.

1. The first one is, "Don't live for endless pleasures. Give up orgies and drunkenness." That covers a whole spectrum of things and means, "Don't devote your life to endless good times, things that you plan over and over again for your own self-indulgence, an endless round of parties or plays or concerts, opera, or even watching television." You can't love and do that. You are wasting your life. You've got only so many precious moments to show this mighty power, this release, this radical power of love. If you spend your moments in endless self-indulgence, you will never be able to live in love.
2. Second, "Don't live for sex." Sex is a powerful force that is highly exploited today. We are constantly surrounded with silken and sensuous temptations to give ourselves to. A new love affair, a new romance, a new sexual liaison will satisfy us, please us, fulfill us. That is what we are after. And the world urges us on to try it. There is no harm in it, they tell us. Paul says there is. He says if you live for these things, you can't fulfill what God wants you to fulfill. You will miss the excitement and the radical glory of loving people. You can't love people and live for sex. Paul covers the whole range of immorality here -- fornication, adultery, homosexuality, pornography. You can't indulge in these things and love; you will hurt people. You will hurt yourself. You will destroy others and destroy yourself. This is so essential that in order to experience the glory of what God wants, you have to lay aside these cheapened, tawdry things. I like what C. S. Lewis says:

We are half-hearted creatures, fooling around with drink and sex and ambition, when infinite joy is offered us. Like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.

This is what Paul calls us away from.

3. The third category is this: "Don't live for strife, causing dissension and jealousy." Again, it is amazing to me how many people get kicks out of being the cause of dissension. They can't seem to enjoy themselves unless they get people fighting and upset and angry -- either with them or with one another. It is amazing how many Christians do this. I remember a word of Jesus which has always helped me very much when I am tempted along these lines. He said, "He that is with me gathers; but he that is against me scatters," {cf, Matt 12:30, Luke 11:23}. There is a way to measure your life. What is your effect upon people? Do you harmonize them? Do you gather them together? Are they noticeably happier because you have come in? Or do strife, division, and separation immediately begin to break out because you are there? What is your life doing? That is the way you can tell whether you are with Jesus or against him. If you are with him, you gather people; if you are against him, you scatter them.

So Paul says it is not only time to get going, and time to give up, but it is time to put on, above all else: "Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to satisfy the desires of your sinful nature."

When I got up this morning I put on my clothes. And so did you, I notice. I put on my clothes with the intention that they would be part of me all this day, that they would go where I go and do what I do. They will cover me and make me presentable to others. That is the purpose of clothes.

In the same way, the apostle is saying to us, "Put on Jesus Christ when you get up in the morning. Make him a part of your life that day. Intend that he go with you everywhere you go, and that he act through you in everything you do. Call upon his resources. Live your life in Christ." That is the way to love.

Notice that Paul uses the full name of Christ, "the Lord Jesus Christ." I think he does this deliberately, because *Lord* stands for his power to rule, his authority, his power to change and alter events, and control history, "to open and no man shuts; to shut and no man opens," {cf, Rev 3:7}. When you put on Jesus Christ, you are putting on a power to operate and change events and effect people that you don't have without him.

When you put on *Jesus*, you are putting on the capacity to love. Read the Gospels and you will find that the striking thing about Jesus of Nazareth was his ability to love. He would put his hand on a loathsome leper to heal him, even though the law forbade that. He would reach out to a lost woman or a drunkard and speak a healing word in their lives. He treated the lowly the same as he did the higher-ups. He loved people. Everywhere people were struck with him. When you put on Jesus, that is what you are putting on -- the capacity to love.

When you put on *Christ*, you are putting on the power to deliver. Christ is the word for *anointed*; it means *Messiah*. It refers to his work. Christ came to deliver us, to set us free. And when you put on Christ, you have an amazing power to free yourself and others from what they are going through.

So put on the Lord Jesus Christ. Remind yourself of his presence all through the day. Reckon on his power to supply love when you begin to obey the command to love. When you start to pay the obligation, he will supply the power to do so. And, as Paul says, "Do not think about how to gratify the desires of your sinful nature." Stop doing that, planning for evil and self-indulgence. That always ends in strife and rivalry and jealousy and debauchery. But rather, learn to love by putting on the Lord Jesus Christ.

These words have forever been made famous by their connection with the conversion of Saint Augustine. Augustine was a young man in the fourth century who was what we would call a swinger. He lived a wild, carousing life, running around with evil companions, doing everything they were doing. He forbade himself nothing, went into anything and everything. And, as people still do today, he came to hate himself for it. One day he was with his friend in a garden, and he walked up and down, bemoaning his inability to change. "O, tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow! How can I free myself from these terrible urges within me that drive me to the things that hurt me!" And in his despair, as he walked in the garden, he suddenly heard what he thought was the voice of a child -- perhaps some children were playing in the garden next door -- and the voice said, "Take and read, take and read." He could not remember any children's games with words like that, but the words stuck. He went back to the table and found lying on it a copy of Paul's letter to the Romans. He flipped

it open, and these were the words he read:

Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies, and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, ... {Rom 13:13-14a NIV}

Augustine said that at that moment he opened his life to Christ. He had known about him, but had never surrendered to him. But that moment he did, and he felt the healing touch from Christ cleansing his life. He was never the same man again. He went on to become one of the greatest Christians of all time -- Saint Augustine.

A couple of weeks ago Eldridge Cleaver was telling me about his days as a Black Panther. He said that while he was a Black Panther he was filled with a terrible, roiling feeling of hatred and violence against any law enforcement agency. He couldn't help himself. Every time he would get with them he would feel this terrible sense of anger and murder and rage within him. It made him the leader of the Black Panthers, the violent militants of the early '60s. But a year or so ago, in the south of France, in a balcony overlooking the Mediterranean Sea, he had a vision, an inner view, of the face of Jesus Christ, coming out of his boyhood to him. It drove him to reading the Scriptures. He read Psalm 23 over and over again. He said that ever since that time on the balcony, he had never had that feeling of hatred again. He has looked for it, and expected it, but instead there has been a feeling of love for everyone he meets.

Now, that is what Jesus Christ is capable of doing. He gives us all the power to love. If we but choose to exercise this power in the moment that needs it, we can release in this world this radical, radical force that has the power to change everything around us. It will change our homes, our lives, our communities, our nations, the world -- because a risen Lord is available to us, to live through us.

I love J. B. Phillips' translation of this last verse:

Let us be Christ's men from head to foot, and give no chance to the flesh to have its fling. {Rom 13:14 J. B. Phillips}

That is the way to live.

Prayer

Our Father, there may be some here this morning who have never surrendered themselves to this living, loving Lord. On this Easter morning we pray that this may be their spiritual birthday, that right now as we are praying, they will open their lives to you and say, "Lord Jesus, come in, be my Lord. Rule in my life, and give to me this amazing ability to love." We ask in his name, Amen.

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