

Advent 1 “Love is the Fulfilling of the Law” Romans 13:14

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing unto You, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen!

Paul exhorts us to love our neighbor and puts that at the top of our virtues here. The whole law of God is summed up with that exhortation.

Paul seems to think that we can really achieve these things. What does that mean? This can be brutal Law. The expectation that good can really be done will cause some to look at their life and realize that they are in fact not there. Does that mean they are not in that kingdom?

For heaven’s sake, no! It may be the message of Advent that we are miserable sinners who cannot save ourselves from this sinful condition, but we also have a correspondingly sweet message of the Gospel that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Without that Gospel, we would be in danger of being overwhelmed by the Law. That would be a tragedy.

At the same time, we dare not simply give ourselves an out on this. Too often we start off hearing words like, “I know you are not perfect....” And it rather lets us off the hook for even trying to be perfect. We think, I know I won’t make it, so I’ll just bail on this. That is cheap grace.

But notice the clothing imagery, “Put on the Lord Jesus Christ.” It is sometime translated as “clothe yourselves with Jesus Christ.” It is as if someone said, “The day is almost here, put on the clothes that fit the day, put on the life that fits the work of Christ.” The image is really one of someone getting out of bed and getting dressed for the day that lies ahead of them. We do this all the time. If it is a day of fixing stuff around the house, we throw on a pair of old jeans and a t-shirt, but if we are heading off for an interview or making a presentation, it might be a jacket and tie. Paul says we are to get dressed for this day of Jesus which is upon us. In the same way Isaiah exhorted his people: let us walk in the light of the LORD (Isaiah 2:5).

Paul's words "put on Christ" as clothing might be well-illustrated with simply donning a particular sports team or other jersey which marks us as a follower. Or when I put on my clerical collar, our alb, or some other distinctive dress or a policeman puts on his uniform. We have uniforms all around us. Does it change one's attitude about who he is, how he acts and behaves? What does it mean to put on that uniform? In a sense, the uniform becomes like the city on the hill, the shining light for all to see. We put on Christ, the very love of God expressed to us.

Yet, putting on Christ is something that we often 'put on' for the world, but we 'take off' when we walk in the front doors of our homes. The world sees the façade, our families and sometimes our neighbors get the real us and the real us is ugly. Putting on Christ is not a façade, but it is meant to be a donning of Christ for every moment of our lives, and it especially should transform the way we treat the people closest to us.

Paul writes with an end-times urgency. He and Jesus' followers of the time had reason to do so. They thought that the world would end before the last disciple died. But we, we have grown comfortable with this waiting thing and wonder if the world will not always go on this way. Can one really be an authentic Christian and believe that the world is **not** coming closer to the end? Isn't that essential to our faith? I am not a dispensational millennialist who believes the Left Behind books and movies and only reads Revelation and Daniel and other such texts. But I do believe we also need, in this Advent season, to remember that Jesus **is** coming, as we have been warned numerous times in Scripture and that we should be ready.

Paul goes on to summarize proper Christian living with a single positive and a single negative expression: "But clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not make for yourselves provision for the flesh, for [its] desires" (13:14). Since Paul uses the same verb "clothe oneself with" in 13:12, one can relate clothing oneself in "the armor of the light" as roughly equivalent to putting on Christ himself. Origen, of course, says it more eloquently: "The Lord Jesus Christ himself ... is said to be the clothing of the saints."

What Paul states explicitly about Baptism in Gal 3:27: “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ” is the same as what he says here in Romans 13:14: “Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh.” Paul employs the same verb in the same voice, person, and number in both passages. On that basis, it is considered to be a “typical baptismal exhortation” and “part of the fixed baptismal vocabulary.”

Yet there is a distinction to be made between the direct reference to Baptism in Gal 3:27 and the command here. In fact, this passage conveys the same “now” and “not yet” framework present in so much of Paul’s theology and in this section as well. Thus Gal 3:27 depicts a past tense event accomplished already in Baptism: “you have clothed yourselves with Christ” or, possibly, “you were clothed with Christ.” Rom 13:14 communicates the “not yet,” the command to live out the baptismal life, as in the new life today, not just the new life given on the “day of our Lord.” In fact, one could say that you have been clothed with Christ by God who laid aside the old person and you have been set to put on Christ and lay aside the old person in your day-to-day life.

Romans 6 provides further parallels which support the baptismal connection. Paul says in Romans 6:4, “We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.” Note that “we might walk,” conveys what has “now” become possible by virtue of being joined to Christ’s death and burial in Baptism. Yet Paul consistently holds off on our complete union with Christ’s resurrection until our own resurrection, the Lutheran “now, not yet.” Paul calls upon his readers to recall their baptisms and confirm once more what happened then and that it has ongoing importance for their lives.

As a result of our baptism and conversion, we have been incorporated into Christ, sharing his death, burial, and anticipating being incorporated into His resurrection (Rom. 6:3–6).... But our relationship to Christ, the new man, while established at conversion, needs constantly to be reappropriated and lived out, as Eph. 4:24, with its call to “put on the new man,” makes clear.

Against this background, Paul's urging to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ" means that we are consciously to embrace Christ in such a way that his character is shown in all that we do and say. This urging appears to match what he says at the beginning of this section, "be transformed by the renewing of the mind" [Rom 12:2], suggesting that it is into the image of Christ that we are being transformed.

This is well said, but one needs to remember that the command "clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ" can only follow, and always flows from, the "clothing in Christ" which was bestowed by God to us in Baptism, never the other way around.

Paul is saying that by the regeneration of Baptism we have been conformed to Christ and become members of the one body of the church, of which He is the head, and so we must put on Jesus through the sure and certain hope that we have our share in His resurrection. How does this all take place? Always and ever through Word and Sacrament. Come! Taste and see that the Lord is good. And let His Word enter into your ears carrying with it His Holy Spirit down into your hearts creating the faith that saves you! In those things you will always be clothed in Christ.

May the love of God and the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and the power of His Holy Spirit abide in you to life everlasting. Amen!