

“The World We Want...and the Only Way to Get It”

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Series: *Romans*

Bible Text: Romans 13:8-14

Preached on: April 5, 2026 - Easter Sunday

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If you have a Bible, you can turn to the New Testament letter of Romans. We're in Romans 13, 8 through 14. If you don't have a Bible, you can follow along in the worship guide. It's printed there for you. We are continuing this series that we've been in. And I want you to know that I know that it's Easter Sunday. I know that. I'm aware. But it makes sense for us to look at this passage for a couple of reasons. The first is it gives me another chance in my inner Puritan to say, we celebrate the resurrection every Sunday, every Sunday, right? Come again next week and we're going to do the same thing that we're doing this Sunday. And so in some sense, it makes sense to go to the next passage. But it is right for us to pause and focus on the resurrection. And this passage that happened to be next in our series really does help us to do just that.

To catch up, especially if you haven't been a part of this, Paul spent chapter after chapter after chapter laying out what he calls the good news, the gospel, our sin and what Christ came to do and how Christ came to give us a righteousness from God and that we can be made right with God, all of those things. In chapter 12, he pivoted and started saying, so what? So how should that affect your life, my life, how we live, et cetera? And at this point, he wants to talk to them about their relationships with each other inside the church and outside the church. So let's read. And remember, this is God's word.

Romans 13:8-14

8 Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.

9 For the 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: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

10 Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.

11 Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed.

12 The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.

13 Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy.

14 But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Would you pray with me?

Lord, we could come to your word and do our best with our brains, and we're thankful that you give us brains that can reason and think. But what we need right now is not just the ability to think. We need the illumination of God the Spirit so that the things that we're reading here can be understood with our minds, grasped from our hearts, and that we can be renewed in our wills. So come and speak, unclog our ears, we ask, and we pray in Jesus' name, amen.

You probably don't know this. I didn't know it until this week, but you and I, if you are a resident of the state of Georgia, you live in a utopia. Let me defend it. Everybody thinks that the colony of Georgia was founded to be a prison colony, right? In fact, there's an argument from historians that James Oglethorpe, the founder of the colony of Georgia, was reading this guy named James Harrington, who was like a utopian republic writer, and he literally set out to establish a colony that would function as a utopia, as a perfect place. His vision of the perfect place was that slavery would be against the law, and it was. Alcohol would be outlawed, no more devil's brew for James Oglethorpe, and there would be equal allocation of land. Utopia. It took 19 years for slavery to become the law of the land, fully accepted, no question. It took less than that for not just the legalization of alcohol, but obviously the thing that he was after, the abuse of alcohol. It took little time at all for that to become legal, and all of the other problems came even quicker. Why? Why? Why no utopia? Why didn't it work? In fact, there have been thousands of utopian societies that have been attempted over the history of humankind.

I was talking to the church planter at Providence Pres in Toccoa about the moon launch that happened this week, and he was telling me in some of his reading that that's one step of this larger plan of establishing colonies potentially for human life on other planets. I thought, why would we do that? We want a utopia. We want the chance to start over. It never works, and I bet you know why, and it's because every time someone starts a utopian society, the problem is they take themselves into it. They get off the boat, and the second they set foot on the new soil where the new land is going to happen, they bring a corrupted human heart that's going to be bent on selfishness into that land, and yet isn't that weird that we have this constant ache for utopia, for a perfect world, and you've never experienced it, and neither have I. It's not something that we have this experience of that we're trying to get back to. We've never experienced it at all, and yet there's this ache, this longing for a world that we wish we had.

That squares with God's word. We could argue that in this passage, Paul tells us what the world that we might want looks like, and he actually ends up telling us the only way to get it, and we'll use that thought for our outline, if you like outlines, we'll talk about the world that we want and the only way to get it.

First, the world that we want.

Paul in the previous passage talked about how Christians are obligated to submit to the authorities over them in the governmental sphere, but he shifts to this broader topic in verse eight. He says, *owe no one anything*. In other words, be obligated to other people for nothing, and this really has to do primarily with money. It's almost like he's saying, he's not saying it's never right to have any debt of any kind. That's not necessarily his point. He's saying if you do owe, you should pay it off, and it's just a good idea not to owe people money, which everybody would agree with, usually a bad idea if you can avoid it. There's a Psalm that says, the wicked borrows and doesn't repay. This is almost like he's saying, don't be that guy that borrows and doesn't repay, but that's really not the point. *Owe no one anything except to love one another*.

Here's what you are obligated to do. Every human being is obligated to this. Love one another inside the church, outside the church. Look at the second half of verse eight and then verse nine. He says, *one who loves another has fulfilled the law*. What law might he be talking about here? You don't have to wonder. He tells us in verse nine, he starts spouting it out. He lists some commandments. *You shall not commit adultery. You shall not murder. You shall not steal. You shall not covet and any other such commandment*. So that law, he's quoting the Ten Commandments and he's using them in such a way as to say these laws are binding on all humans for all time. The summary statement for the laws is *you shall love your neighbor as yourself*, which strangely enough is a quote from Leviticus. We have quoted Leviticus on Easter Sunday morning. Let the record show, right?

It's also what Jesus says in Matthew's gospel. Remember the great commandment. He says *the law is summed up in this way. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul and all your mind. And the second is like it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself*.

So the law was given in the Old Testament for Israel, yes, but the law was given by the creator to the creation to show what the creation was supposed to live like, to show the character of God himself and how the world is supposed to work under the God who made us.

Imagine a world where no one ever committed adultery. Let's go further. Where no one ever had an adulterous thought, where no one ever had an adulterous desire. Imagine a world.

Imagine a world where no one ever murdered or was inordinately angry.

Imagine a world where no one ever stole or desired someone else's stuff.

So to love people means that we don't do some things. And we need to say that because it's too vague to say we should just love people. Right? You kind of see that on bumper stickers. Love God, love people. It's that simple. And I want to say, is it that simple? Is it really that simple? I don't think it is. What does love mean? The world might define that in a lot of ways, but God actually defines it for us right here.

Love means that you look to what is best for other people and you do that first before you ever even think about yourself.

It means that you don't commit adultery because loyalty and faithfulness is what's best for you. It's what's best for your spouse. It's what's best for the person you would commit adultery with. And it's what honors the God who made you.

Stealing hurts everyone. Stealing. It's bad for the person from whom you steal. It's bad for you. It dishonors God. We could go on.

We could say that love, biblically defined, is seeking what is best for other people made in God's image and therefore dying to our selfishness that would take something from them regardless of the cost.

Do you know how the world around you defines love? It's not that. The world around you defines love something like this. Let's be reasonable. Take care of yourself, and if you have something left over, you can use that with your neighbor. At best, that's how it's defined. Take care of yourself first. We're in the era of self-care. Take care of yourself first. Get everything that you need. Make sure you've got plenty for yourself, and then if you have a little bit left over, you can share some with a neighbor. And God's word says, do no wrong to a neighbor, even if it means you never get what you want. Die to your own selfishness for the good of other people. Negatively stated, don't do evil. Positively stated, it's so much harder.

Imagine this. Do not commit adultery. Here's the flip side of that. Be faithful to your spouse when he or she has given you no reason to. Be faithful to your spouse when he or she is utterly unattractive to you. Be faithful to your spouse when he or she can no longer give anything back to you in return. That is so much harder. It's so much harder to lead out with love towards someone who can't even return it.

Same with, it's not just do not murder. It's seek to preserve and promote life in every respect, from conception to old age, even when it will require all of your energy and time to bear with someone else, to not get inordinately angry with them, to endure your own despair and take care of babies and take care of the aged. It's why Christians, regardless of their perhaps differing political strategies, are against abortion and murder with malicious intent and euthanasia and suicide. In all of those things a Christian is called to say, no, no, no, no, no, no, God is in charge of life. I am not. I am not. Death is out of my hands. Ironically, when we seek to serve the people who are most helpless and leave death in the hands of God, we find life. Seeking to promote a culture of life when you live in a culture of death is so hard. And many of you have tried it and you're involved and you're exhausted from it.

It's not just do not steal. It's steward what you have and make sure you help your neighbor to have what they need too.

It's not just do not covet. It's be joyfully content wherever you are with whatever you have, with gratitude radiating out of your heart. I don't know how often that happens for me. It's so much harder. And yet, wouldn't we say, oh, yeah, that's the world I wish I lived in. Yeah, that's the world I would like to be a part of. That's the way I wish my heart operated and functioned. I wish my desires were right and my ambitions were proper and everything was ordered and that I wasn't spinning out of control and all of my wants. I wish I lived in a world where others delight to care for me and I delight to care for others.

You know, every culture agrees to this at some level. That's why the Ten Commandments are reproduced in different cultures with very different religious ideologies. It's not just that God revealed this to Israel and therefore Christians have it. It's that God made the world to work this way. And therefore, it's part of the image of God stamped on every people. When we love one another, we're living as God intended us to live, fulfilling the law. Wouldn't that be a great world?

Well, let's close in prayer, right? Sounds exciting. Super encouraging so far. Let's make it worse for a minute before we turn the corner. I don't have to tell you why that world doesn't exist. And it's not the things that you might see on TV. Well, if we just had better education or if we just had the right policies in place or if we just had this structural change, the answer is much worse and much simpler than that.

We don't live in that world because of sin.

The Bible is very clear on this. And sin's fundamental expression is radical selfishness, a radical inward turn, a pride that wakes up every morning and assumes, I'm pretty sure that I am the center of the universe and I should get what I want at all costs. Who will come and serve me? That's just like, that's morning. That's standard operating procedure for every human heart. Let's do ourselves the favor of being honest for a minute.

The world that we wish we had doesn't exist and we are the reason for it.

And I don't just say that collectively. That has to become personal. Let me say it this way. That world doesn't exist and you are the reason it doesn't exist. That world doesn't exist and I am the reason it doesn't exist. It's the writer G.K. Chesterton who saw a headline in a newspaper that said, it was like an op-ed and it said, what's wrong with the world? And G.K. Chesterton took the opportunity to write into that paper and here was his response. Dear sirs, I am. Yours G.K. Chesterton. That's great. I am. I am the problem. This is what brings down every utopian society attempt, every system of government. The fundamental flaw in all of them is exactly the same. See democracy and capitalism could work so perfectly and seamlessly except that humans are really selfish. Monarchy could just work so well. We could have such great kings and live as happy citizens of a kingdom if humans weren't so selfish. Oligarchy, you could go on down the line.

All the different forms of government may work if humans weren't fundamentally bent on taking care of their own needs first. Your home would be a pleasant place if those people who live there would actually love each other and not try to get what they want all the time. Your workplace could be a fun and enjoyable place to work if those people who work there weren't so greedy and constantly trying to jump over each other's backs.

We are the problem.

And let me make this argument, that until we see that and take radical responsibility for it, Easter Sunday won't make a lot of sense to us. It might be a fun day, but it won't be a meaningful day. Until we see that we've failed to fulfill God's law, and it's actually worse than that, we've risen up and tried to overthrow the God who gave us his law, until we see that, we won't be able to understand why Jesus had to come live, die and rise again.

Some of you probably go through life feeling like you're doing okay, you're not hurting anyone, and you might be tempted to think, I'm doing fine, I'm not sure why I need God's help for anything. Others of you have gone a very different direction, and you might assume that if there is a God and I'm not sure there is a God, but if there is one, he certainly just wants me to be happy.

See, one person thinks they're good, and the other person has stopped caring about goodness altogether. And the place to be is to be able to see the goodness of God's law, and how we personally flaunt and fail it, and that we need help.

So that's my first question for you this morning. Could you ever be a person who admits at a fundamental heart level, I need help, I'm not okay, I'm not winning, I'm a pretty selfish person, and it hurts the people around me, and I'm pretty sure it offends the God who made me? Could you ever get to a place where you would say that? If God handed you a ledger just over a two month period, and it was just these laws and not the others, where would there be a mark in the ledger?

Where would it say that you've wronged a neighbor? Where is there an adulterous action or thought or desire? Right, there it is on the ledger.

A murderous desire, a hatred that's so deep that you wish that person was dead....mark.

A theft of time, a theft of stuff, a theft of love that you promised to give, a theft of emotion, and a sharing of your life that you vowed to share.....mark.

Where would there be wishing that you had what that person had, and a grumbling discontent with what you do have.....mark.

There's a world we wish we had, the blame falls on us, it's really, really bad news. What if there was a way to get it? What if there was a way to get the world that you really wish you had, but there was only one way to get it? Would you take it? That's the question, let's talk about that.

The one way to get it.

If we would ever become someone who loves a neighbor, who fulfills God's law, whoever has a taste of the world we want, let me say it's not going to be because we finally mastered a specific self-help technique, or we finally mastered up the ability to begin to do what God wants us to do. It just won't be because of that. That's been tried, and that's been found wanting. It will be because we finally have understood and leaned into what God himself has done for us. And the way Paul says that here is that it'll be because we know what time it is.

Look at verse 11. He says, *besides you know the time*. That word there is the idea of a season, an epic of history. He uses night and day language, that *the night is far gone, the day is at hand*. This is more than just a metaphoric, illustrative way of speaking. This is the language of our time and place in history, in light of the end, and where we are in terms of God's overarching plans for the world. What time is it? We live in the era after the coming of Christ. We live in a time that has begun the eternal day. Sometimes we say it this way, that in the coming of Christ, the kingdom of God has come to earth already, and it's not yet here fully. Sometimes we say that the age to come has plunked itself, if that's the technical theological word, plunked into our age, and we live in the overlapping of the ages. The key event that brought us into this time is the reason that you're here today. It is the resurrection of the Son of God from the grave, that the moment when the Lord Jesus stepped out of the tomb and defeated death, finally and fully, is the moment when the age to come began. The light at the end of the tunnel of the day intruded into the darkness. It has begun. It's the time of our salvation, he says. The time when Jesus came, lived perfectly, died in place of sinners, and rose defeating all of his and all of our enemies, and now we wait for him to return. Paul says *salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. The night is far gone and the day is at hand*.

I put some quotes on the front of your bulletin. There's a theologian named George Ladd who says, Jesus' resurrection is an eschatological end of the world event, an anticipation of the end. To speak crudely, it's a piece of eschatology split off from the end and planted in history. The end has begun; the future is present.

“This has led us to designate Jesus’ resurrection as an eschatological event. It is an anticipation of the end. To speak crudely, it is a piece of eschatology split off from the end and planted in history. The end has begun; the future is present.” ~ George Eldon Ladd

Another theologian, John Murray, says that the light of the future day is shining backward into history.

“The day of Christ, though not yet come, is nevertheless throwing its light backward upon the present. In that light believers much now live; it is the dawning of the day of unprecedented splendor.” ~ John Murray

If that's true, that's not what you're going to find on social media or your newsfeed, but if it's actually true that you live in the dawning of the age to come that will never end, that will make this life seem like a blip on the radar screen and a vapor. If that's actually true, there's one reasonable response to it.

Verse 11, wake from sleep.

There's our problem. Even if you've believed, we get so sleepy. *Wake from sleep.* Realize *the night is gone. The day is at hand.* Even that Paul thought the second coming of Christ would happen in his lifetime, he gets accused of that sometimes. That's not how prophets speak of the things that God is doing in the world. He's saying the day is at hand and what's next in line is the second coming of Jesus. We don't know when that will happen, but this is Paul saying keep believing. Keep your eyes open. Realize what time it is and realize that you live in the era when **Jesus, the son of God, has been raised and you live in guaranteed hope.** That's the only reason that now you can begin to live faithfully. That's how he ends the passage. Here's what it looks like to live faithfully in the overlap of the ages.

Put some things off, and put someone on.

You see this in the passage. Verse 12, *let's cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.* Christ has been raised. It's daytime. Why would you and I continue to live in darkness? He lists them so we know what they are.

Verse 13, here are all the deeds of darkness. They were the normal things that people did in the Roman Empire. They look shockingly familiar to 21st century Americans. Great parallel between the Roman Empire and our current culture. You can think of those terms in verse 13 as sexual chaos, radical substance abuse, use of things like sex or food or other pleasures as coping mechanisms, inordinate loves, trolling, conflict, cancellation, jealousy, all the desires of the flesh, all the darkness of life, all that the ordinary world does when they decide, I'll get what I want at all costs. Forget about God. Forget about other people. Forget about anything but letting my own heart be my God and getting what I want. This is what it looks like. And Paul says, yeah, all that, cast that off. You don't need any of that. Put it away. You have in Christ what you need to stop being radically selfish now. The lights come. Don't put the blanket over your head and pretend that it's still nighttime. It's not. It's daytime.

And then he says, *put on the armor of light.*

Or verse 14, *put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh.* Remember the rest of the letter.

*You've been united to Jesus by faith if you've come to Christ.
Everything, every blessing that he has, is yours.*

Your union with him is such that you have a standing with God. You're justified. You're adopted as a son. You are being sanctified, sin's power is broken. You're already glorified in his eyes.

So keep putting him on. Walk around in him. Take those eternal realities and let them be what is normal for you every day that you wake up. Not whatever the agenda of the world is that is dictated to you. This is the only way. You want to start being a loving person who hates wickedness. You want to start living out something of the world that you wish you lived in. This is the only way to do it. It's to put off the deeds of darkness and to put on the Lord Jesus Christ and walk around in him, and to live realizing that everything that was on that ledger for you earlier, every little tick, every single thing, every thought that no one else knows about, all of them, **every single ledger mark fell on the head of Jesus when he endured the wrath and justice of God in place of sinners like you and me.**

He did it. It's finished. It's done. You can be completely made clean and new. He was raised to life, vindicated, seated on the throne. The devil's been defeated. Death's been undone. Sin's penalty has been taken, but also sin's power has been broken. And that means you now have the ability to repent and turn. And he's going to make you more and more like him until all things are made new.

The world that you wish you had is coming. And because of the resurrection of Jesus, it has now begun.

I had a conversation with my four-year-old last week about shoes. She got new shoes. She didn't want to wear them because they hurt. Being a four-year-old, she finally can reason some, a little bit. Nobody tell her that I'm talking about her because if you do, I'll owe her ice cream. So just a bond between me and you. But I talked to her and I said, okay, you'll get used to them. If you'll

walk around in them, they break in and they won't hurt anymore. And like two days later, she came to me and she said, dad, you were right. And I wanted to record it and play it back to her for the rest of her life in my house. Dad, you were right. They don't hurt anymore. It's just like a great parenting moment of, oh, you listened and it worked.

Some of you are finding out that the Christian life is uncomfortable, especially if you're on the new end of it. It can feel uncomfortable even if you're on the latter end of it. Those first few months or years or a difficult season where like the clothes that you've been given, the robe of righteousness is just, it doesn't fit right. Something feels weird. You're going to have to stop some things, start some things, die to old desires, figure out how to deal with people.

But maybe this is where the analogy breaks down. It's not as though the new clothes get broken in. It's that the clothes break you in. Clothes don't change. We change. The robe of righteousness is perfect. We're the ones that don't fit it. And it's the work of God to change us so that we actually begin to fit into the thing that we've been given. And godliness actually doesn't become drudgery. It becomes joy. And obedience to God's law doesn't become, oh, here's this thing I have to do. It becomes, this is the path of life. This is how it's supposed to be, and it changes. We get remolded, reshaped.

Brothers and sisters, keep putting off the deeds of darkness and putting on Christ in the armor of his light. There will be some cost, but you'll start fitting into the clothes.

Let me address one thing before we wrap up here. Some of you might have to grapple with this. If you're honest, the world that you wish you lived in is not the world I talked about earlier that is a world of self-giving love. If you were honest, you might have to acknowledge the world that you wish you lived in looks more like verse 13, where humans are given free reign to do absolutely whatever they want with no repercussions. Sexual chaos, no repercussions, substance abuse, sensuality, fighting are blessed, normal, and wonderful, and there's no cost to it. And to you, I would say you won't be anywhere until you realize that even that desire is the problem. Our desires are broken. You won't be anywhere until you realize that that way actually leads to death. It can't possibly give me what it promises me. Ask anyone who got those things how it went. They were miserable and they caused wreckage. Until we sober up from that, we're nowhere.

All the while, Jesus Christ is alive in a perfected body at the right hand of God and promises that one day he will return bodily, every eye will see him, and he will evaluate single human being that's ever lived and he will hold them all to account. He'll bring his people into a new heavens and a new earth where it's glory and rightness.

The only difference between you and those people who go into glory and those who endure his justice, the only difference, everybody's full of sin, the only difference is **can you admit it and can you ask him for help?**

What would it look like for you to acknowledge that the world you want is the world where you get everything that you want? To acknowledge it to Jesus and ask him to save you and change you. It's the only way. We'd love to talk to you more about that if that's where you're at.

Can't talk about this passage with wrapping up here with Saint Augustine. Some of you know that name. Saint Augustine wrote the book you were supposed to read in high school called *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*. You probably still have it on your shelf or you sold it. I think I did, pretty sure. He was the bishop of a city called Hippo in Northern Africa. His mother was a believer and she raised him in the truth and he hated it, all of it. He ran so hard from God. He stole stuff for fun. He dabbled in all manner of philosophy just because it was interesting and it wasn't Christianity. He was sexually promiscuous. All the things listed in verse 13 here, Augustine would have said, yes, that is the path for me. That led to some misery and he began to question what's true and what's false and there was a day when he found himself in a garden in the middle of this process and he said I thought I heard a child's voice saying, take up and read, take up and read, as if it were part of a children's game and he said but I couldn't come up with a children's game that had that line in it. I'm not recommending that you start doing this but this is what he did. He said, so I took it as a sign from heaven, I picked up the Bible, opened it to the first page and read what it said and the first thing that he read, *put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh to gratify its desires* and he said, no further would I read nor did I need, for instantly as the sentence ended, by a light as it were of security infused into my heart, all the gloom of doubt vanished away.

If you know anything about his life, he would go on to be the theological voice that would shape everything about Christianity even up to this very day. You and I in this room are here because of St. Augustine's work. And it's because he saw **the Lord Jesus is alive and I must put him on and not gratify the desires of the flesh**. Friends he lived, he died, he was raised to bring us the world that we've always wanted, a new heavens and a new earth where everything works right, even we work right, it's what's coming but it started now.

So put off the deeds of darkness and put on the risen Lord Jesus Christ. Let's pray.

Father, you know how we struggle to believe. I ask that today you would press your word into our minds and our hearts. I pray for anyone here who is severely discouraged that today they would realize that the Lord Jesus lives and will raise us up and everything will be fine. For those who simply don't believe, I ask Lord that you would make them uncomfortable. That you would help them to see their sin and misery and that it might get really worse for them for a time so that they might see the Lord Jesus and cling to him and have the burden removed. Would you give them life? Would you open their eyes? Lord and for all of us who simply desire to persevere and to make it through to the end and wake up in a new heavens and a new earth one day Lord, help us persevere. Even now as we come to the table, would you meet us and would you help us endure? We ask Jesus in your name, amen.

**Portion of scripture read before sermon—Leviticus 19:9-18