

What I mean, brothers, is that the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they had none;³⁰ those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep;³¹ those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away. (1 Corinthians 7:29-31)

Do You Know What Time it Is?

Have you ever heard of the Doomsday Clock? Since 1947, the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* has used a symbolic clock counting minutes to midnight to represent how close they think we are to the destruction of life as we know it – most likely, through a nuclear war. They have reset the time on the clock 22 times since 1947. It's ranged from 17 minutes to midnight all the way to 2 minutes to midnight. Of course, the closer they set it, the greater they think the danger is that we will destroy ourselves. Do you know what the current setting is? Two and half minutes to midnight. Next Thursday, they're planning to announce the next adjustment, so who knows what they'll say?

The Doomsday Clock is a powerful way to express this group's concerns. In effect, these scientists and activists are asking us, "Do you know what time it really is?" They answer that it's almost too late to stop ourselves from destroying our world – so we better do something. Now, my goal today isn't to argue about politics. But St. Paul does talk about how late it really is and the fact that this world is passing away. Now St. Paul never heard of nuclear war. He wasn't trying to start a peace movement in the Roman Empire. Paul was talking about spiritual realities: God has decreed a day when the world as we know it will end. In effect, he was asking every Christian of every age, **do you know what time it is?**

I.

He tells us: **It's almost time for this world to pass away.** He says, **"What I mean, brothers, is that the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they had none."** Now, at first glance, this might sound a little like that old comedy routine: "Take my wife – *please!*" Do you think that's really what Paul was saying? Of course not. These verses are part of a long discussion about the practical realities of marriage in a sinful world. Anyone who really wants to understand the challenges of being a Christian spouse in a sinful world should study this chapter. And it is true that Paul advises Christians to stay single, if they have that gift, because of what he calls "the present crisis" – all the sin and persecution the church was facing – and because a single Christian can focus his or her attention primarily on serving the Lord, while a married Christian always has to balance practical concerns with his or her desire to always put God first.

Many people today say that Paul was a male chauvinist and a woman hater. But these three verses show that the hard things he says in this chapter do not mean that he hated women or that he devalued marriage. Paul knew that marriage was a gift of God. But he also knew that the devil uses the people we love most – our spouses and our children and our parents – to try to drive a wedge between us and God. Paul wanted us to remember to put our relationship with God first.

You see that when you hear all that he said: **"From now on those who have wives should live as if they had none; those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away."** Is Paul saying there's something wrong with mourning for those we love? Or with being happy when God blesses us? Of course not. This morning, we had the privilege of witnessing a baptism, a cause of great joy. Since last Tuesday, our whole congregation has been happy because God gave Maggie and Aaron a beautiful baby girl. Paul is not saying we shouldn't rejoice in those blessings or that there's anything wrong with a Christian hurting when someone they love dies. God gave us that person and when it's time for that blessing to end, it hurts. Paul knew that. He's not saying it's wrong to buy a new car or to save money for your retirement.

His point really is not about what we do. It's about our attitude toward those things. Marriage is one of God's greatest gifts, but it is temporary because this life is temporary. My wife and I promised to be faithful until death parts us. But unless God takes us in a car accident or a plane crash, chances are, one of us will outlive the other. In the life to come, Becky and I will not be married. I would like to believe that we'll still

share memories of our lives together here and that every couple of hundred years, we'll get together for coffee and laugh and tell stories about raising our kids. But the gift we have today is only for this life.

That means that even our marriages are less important than getting to heaven, where we will live with Jesus forever. The same is true about all sorrow and joy here. None of it lasts. Thankfully, sorrow ends when we see Jesus. But all the joys of this life, too, will end at the same moment. Several months after my first child was born, I taught a class about what happens when we die. So I asked the class what in this life they had to live for. I asked them what blessing they would miss if God took them home to heaven right at that moment. Then I said, "My baby daughter has so many smiles in her life that are just for me. If God took me home to heaven today, I wouldn't get those smiles." And then I told them that I hoped and prayed that God would let me have those smiles, but if he did take me home to heaven that day, I would be better off. I would be more blessed, even without those precious smiles.

And, of course, if eternal life is better even than the love of a baby daughter, it's got to be better than a new car or a nice house or a vacation in Germany. Paul is talking about putting first things first, because Jesus is coming back. Every year, I ask my catechism class, "If you lived for a hundred years, and everything was wonderful – if you had good health and good friends and lots of money and people loved you, but you died and went to hell, did you win?" The answer is no. The time is short. We have only as much time as God gives us here to come to faith in Jesus and reach eternal life. And I don't know if all of us will still be here next Sunday when we have church. The Lord might come back. Or he might call some of us home.

Now, you might be thinking, "OK, pastor, but we know all that. We believe in Jesus. We were baptized, too, and we have all those promises that God made to Lovella this morning." That is absolutely true. But we didn't go to heaven the day we were baptized and most of us aren't going to go to heaven today, either. Every day that we are here, our sinful hearts want to abandon Christ. The unbelievers around us tempt us to join them. The devil tries to steal our faith. What does he use? Most of the time, he uses the ordinary things of this life. The distractions. The competing demands on our time. Work. Family. Sports schedule and music lessons. Housework and that pile of bills that needs to be paid every month. The need to keep up with our friends on Facebook or Snapchat or whatever social media distraction you waste your time on, to say nothing of all the movies and websites and TV shows we want to see. It's rare for a baptized child of God to say, "I just realized that I like sinning and I don't want to be a Christian anymore." But every church in our synod wrestles with people drifting away. It could happen to us, too.

So what is the answer? Focus. The time is short. The world as we know it is passing away. We remind ourselves that our home is heaven. Our goal is eternal life. Our real and true existence will be with Jesus. C. S. Lewis once said that our entire lives here are just the title page of the book of our lives. The rest we will write as we live with Jesus for all eternity. So every day that we're here, we need to recognize the danger of getting consumed by this life. We need to recognize the sin in our own hearts that wants to be consumed. We need to return to Jesus, who died and rose and wiped all that sin away. Then he sent the Holy Spirit into our hearts to give us faith – for most of us, in our baptisms. Day after day, week after week, we come back to Jesus here in church, in the word and in communion, and in our homes, as we study that word together. And God works to keep our hearts and minds focused on him. Every time he says we are forgiven, he renews our faith. My friends, we are forgiven!

II.

But that isn't the end of the story, because we don't go straight to heaven as soon as we come to faith. We have lives to live here – that's God's plan. That means we have work to do here. If you are alive, you have work to do. My friends, **do you know what time it is? It's time for us to do God's work.**

Now, Paul doesn't mention serving God specifically here. But the context of these verses is a chapter about marriage. Paul gives guidance about when to marry and when not to. He talks about what to do if your spouse is an unbeliever and how to avoid sin if you're unmarried and what your attitude should be when you get married. You know what? All that is serving the Lord. We need to get away from the idea that the only way you serve God is if you stand up here or if you're on a board or committee at church. We serve God every day of our lives. We serve God or the devil by the way we do our jobs and treat our spouses and care for our children or parents. So as long as we live, it's time for us to serve God.

But there is a great need for us to serve him in our congregation – and not just in formal positions in the church. St. Paul, in many places, talks about what it means to be a good member of the body of Christ. What

does it mean? It means coming and hearing the word. It means supporting the work God sends us with a offering that reflects how God has blessed you. It means showing love to each other – encouraging one another when life is hard, helping one another resist temptation, teaching one another what God really says in his word, calling one another to repent when sin owns us. We are good members when we talk to each other. When we grieve with each other. When we rejoice with each other. In all those things, we reflect the love of Christ.

And, lest I be misunderstood, there is also a need for us to help our congregation accomplish its mission. We have vacant spots on our boards and council. We need women to take responsibility for many things in our congregation, too. And we all need to be ready to explain our faith in Jesus. Every one of you knows your Savior. God calls all of us to be a part of sharing that good news. In a couple of weeks, I'm going to stand up here and roll out for you some ways that you can help our congregation share the gospel. God willing, it will be on February 4th, so mark your calendar. But above all, recognize that God has given you a specific time of grace, a specific time to know your Savior. Part of that time is a specific set of opportunities to be a part of his work. Recognizing that the time is short means having a sense of urgency about the work God gives us to do. Today will only come today. What opportunities will God give you to serve him today? Because you are going to spend time without end with him in heaven, spend some of this time today serving your Lord here.

There's a rock band that was popular in the seventies called Chicago. Since you all know that I'm a diehard Chicago Bears fan, it might surprise you to learn that I'm not a big fan of that band. But one of their biggest hits has a refrain that says, "Does anybody really know what time it is? Does anybody really care?" Now, I don't think that band was talking about Jesus coming back any more than the guys that run the Doomsday Clock are talking about Jesus' return. And that's too bad, because they both could be. They almost echo St. Paul's words. Do you know what time it is, my friends? It's almost time for Jesus to come and put an end to all the sin and suffering of this life and take us home. It's time for us to spread that good news and serve him with our lives until he gets here. Amen.