

Reverend Rob Schenck sermon: The Armor of Light

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Well, this morning, if you have an old-timey, old world paper Bible like I do, this technology has worked for 5,000 years and it's still working. Or if you have it on your phone, or your iPad, let's open to Romans chapter 13 this morning, Romans 13 and verse 12. Romans 13:12. I'm going to read it to you out of the English Standard version. Romans 13 and verse 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." Let's pray. Holy God, now as we look at this your word, open our eyes to see its truth, our ears to hear your voice, our lives that we be not hearers only but doers of this word. For we pray in Jesus' name and say together, amen and let it be so. This thirteenth chapter of Romans is as important as any other chapter in Holy Scripture of course but it's also one of the most important to me as a missionary to Capitol Hill because the chapter actually opens with the question of the Christian's responsibility to civil authority. In other words, matters of church and state. But because of that, it's also historically one of the most misunderstood, misapplied and grotesquely abused chapters in the Bible. From the post Reformation to kingdom's theory when kind of runaway theologians spawned this idea of two tracts of responsibility of ethical and moral accountability, in other words a sacred and a secular so you could bifurcate your life, and you could behave one way in private with your personal religious beliefs and another way in public with your wider

secular beliefs or secular moral and ethical obligations and that was taken of course to its extension all the way to the Nazis who used this chapter to defend their heinous crimes against humanity when they said that because they were duty bound to be good citizens they had to obey orders even if that meant stuffing innocent people in ovens.

So this chapter is loaded in so many ways and the interpretations of it have really been grotesquely erroneous over the millennia over...certainly over centuries. But the part we're looking at here is something different. Here Paul advises us how we are to live our lives seamlessly, public and private but mostly this has to do with our interior life, with what's happening inside of us in our souls, in the deepest recesses of our being, of our consciousness and of our relationship to God. In our hearts and in our minds and in this one powerful verse we find that this code for living begins by taking something off and putting something on. "Cast off the works of darkness," the apostle says, "and put on the armor of light." Well, darkness and light are constant themes throughout Holy Scripture, from the opening words of Genesis to the opening words of the Gospel of John, to the very last chapters of Revelation, light and darkness play off each other. With light always best thing, it's antagonist, darkness. That's an important principle to remember.

John will later tell us that darkness did not, can not imply will not ever overcome the light. So light and darkness, important themes in the Christian life and in Christian formation and very pertinent for me as a missionary in Washington, DC, light and darkness are constantly in my consciousness. Somebody asked me the

other day how can you stand being in such a dark place like Washington, DC? Well, I said because I carry a really good light with me.

Jesus said, "You are the light of the world." The Psalmists said, "Your word, O Lord, is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path." John tells us in the second to the last chapter of the Bible in Revelation 21 and 23, that "the New Jerusalem, the Holy City of God, has no need of sun or moon to shine on it for the glory of God gives it light and its lamp is the lamb." Christians know the source of light. Of spiritual light. And that should give us great comfort and great confidence. It should dispel anxiety and fear and give us reason for hope and for security.

Now speaking of darkness and light and of hope and security, I've got to tell you about a conversation I've been a part of in Washington and around the country on a subject that comes to my attention routinely and I talk about it with law and policymakers on all levels of government. But before I say more, I want to rehearse with you a little bit of our shared history together, you and me. We've got stories to tell. And they are stories. You know, Pastor Harry, I was trying to figure out in our conversation last night when I first visited Come Alive and it was over 25 years ago. So I've been coming and going from this place for a quarter century. There could be people in this church who were not alive when I first visited and now are married with children.

So I'm getting to be an old-timer around here and over all this time you've come to know me and you know I've taken on a few controversial issues over the years. When I first visited you, do you remember, I came in a running suit, in sweats. And the reason was I had just finished a 2,000 mile trek from the border of

Canada, just across the border into Mexico because I had taken on Mexico's massive political corruption in their inhabited garbage dumps where individuals and political figures were profiteering off the suffering of some of the poorest people on earth living literally in, on, and off the trash of one of the world's biggest cities. So I decided to call attention to that problem and if you remember I did that by making my trek across America. We called it Faith Walk and it turned a spotlight on that terrible problem and over a relatively short period of time not only did you and other of God's people help those people, we built clinics and schools, we helped relocate them to families but eventually the Mexican government relocated all of those people to fairly decent housing and plowed under those inhabited dumps so in the end it was worth a little bit of controversy and even a couple of death threats that I got from some of the potentates south of the border. But I...I got my first experience with controversy and it was worth it.

Then I took on the enormous scourge of abortion in our own country and you know what happened then. We held what we called back then pray-ins in front of the doors of abortion businesses, mostly in New York State but fanned out across the country and we offered women help with their babies, offering them medical care and baby clothing and supplies and even adoption services and many pre-born babies were saved, born and some of them raised by their parents, others by adopted parents and there were wonderful outcomes and we know some of those children in adulthood today.

And it got me in a little trouble, if you remember. Some of you. In fact, it got me thrown in the slammer on one occasion for a nine month sentence in a

medium security penitentiary for leading a prayer vigil without a parade permit. Fortunately the New York Supreme Court overturned that and I only did a little time but it was enough time and it was a little...little...little bit of controversy there.

And then I got swept up, got to know and be part of the drama that surrounded a moment at the Washington National Cathedral when I found myself approaching the communion rail with then president Bill Clinton and I did what every good pastor would do, I...I simply leaned over and said to the president, Mr. President, God will hold you to account for the babies. He had just vetoed the second partial birth abortion ban act, and I thought he needed some admonishment, edification, correction, there at the communion rail and got me in a little trouble. Specifically detained by the Secret Service and that's still a problem for me when I'm clearing security and in Washington so little...little bit of controversy there.

And then I met a guy named Roy Moore who became chief justice of the state of Alabama, and you remember that little incident? Helped him install a monument of the Ten Commandments in the rotunda of the Alabama Judicial Building, the seat of the Supreme Court of that state and when he was ordered to remove it I decided no, we'll surround it with pastors on their knees praying for an end to this kind of outrage in America and that got me in a little trouble. In fact it got me thrown in the Montgomery county jail. And when we were breaking a fast with what they called food, I'm not sure it was, but it was jail food, and I decided we should sing the Doxology, (SINGS) "Praise God from whom all blessings flow, praise him all creatures hear below, you know it? Praise him above ye heavenly host. Praise father, son and Holy..." Oh, didn't get there. Officer jabbed me in the arm and

said Reverend, we don't do that here and she threw me in solitary confinement. A little controversy there. So I get very lonely whenever I hear the Doxology, I don't know why, but I get lonely.

But anyway, all that to say I've had my taste of controversy over my ministry career. So I decided to keep with the tradition, I would do it again this morning. So here I go again. Because I want to tell you about this very controversial discussion that is going on in Washington and it has to do with Christians and guns. Many people in Washington, politicians, judges, journalists, have asked me something to the effect of so what's with you Christians and your guns? Because they know the stats.

American evangelicals, that is Bible believing, Born Again Christians in the largest numbers, and I have to qualify this statistically, white evangelical Born Again Bible believing Christians support in overwhelming numbers both the NRA and expansive Second Amendment gun rights. And a lot of the Washington folks have noticed that and some of them see it as oxymoronic.

Now, before anyone gets up to leave, let me tell you I'm not anti-gun, I'm not anti-NRA, that's not what motivates me. In fact, I'll tell you a little secret, I actually carry an NRA membership card and I've been out to the NRA range and I have done some shooting there and actually enjoyed it and I was impressed with the very professional and highly regulated way they govern that range.

And I don't take my cues from Michael Bloomberg and I have no interest in his social machinations or his political aspirations. I do have deep concerns about Christians jumping on secular bandwagons, whether they're for or

against gun policies. And I'm especially concerned about where we go to form our opinions on we...on...on how we as Christians should approach the question of lethal force.

Let me explain in the context of this verse, back to Romans, chapter thirteen. And looking at our verse eleven. Paul says, "Cast off the works of darkness." Now darkness represents many things in scripture, evil and wickedness in Proverbs 2 and Acts 17, death in Job 3, spiritual blindness in Isaiah 9, immorality in this very text, in fact in verse 13 Paul lists orgies and drunkenness, sexual immorality, quarrelling and jealousy, provisions of the flesh as expressions of darkness, ignorance in Psalm 82:5 they have neither knowledge nor understanding, they walk about in darkness. First John 2:11 compares darkness with hatred, "whoever hates his brother is in darkness." Terrors and fears, Psalm 91, even Satan and hell occupy darkness in second Peter, Jude and Revelation.

Now darkness also represents idolatry. Ezekiel associates idol worshippers with places of darkness in Ezekiel 8 and 12, he said to me, son of man, God speaking, "Have you seen what the elders of Israel are doing in the darkness? Each at the shrine of his own idol." Idolatry is a form of spiritual darkness. It's also a form of ignorance. Ignorance of God and of the truth.

Now idolatry occurs when we transfer our devotion, our obedience and our loyalty from the heavenly to the earthly. From the divine to human agencies. As theologians state it, from the ultimate which is God to the penultimate which is man. When we take that downward turn from God to man, from sacred to

secular, we set up a false god, an imitation, a pretender and we put on darkness and we enter the realm of darkness.

Now what does this have to do with the question of Christians and guns? Let me try to make some sense of it. Idolatry presents a dangerous temptation to move away from God and good, from light to darkness, and when you take a lethal weapon with you on that path, the potential for mayhem increases exponentially.

In a phone conversation this week, about this message, Pastor Harry made a comment to me about how he has worried as a pastor about a firearm in the home. I think Harry, you were probably thinking maybe of a handgun that somebody might have for personal defense or other purposes and that the presence of that lethal weapon presents a temptation that otherwise wouldn't exist, that just the availability of a gun in a rash moment has led to many murders and suicides. And the numbers, Pastor Harry, back you up.

In fact, in a moment of rage or a moment of fear, a loaded firearm, a pistol, a semiautomatic rifle, whatever, presents a quick and relatively easy way to resolve a conflict. It's easy, in that you don't need a lot of creativity with it, you probably need a little more skill than you think. It's not as easy as it is on television. Anyone who has shot a pistol knows that. But it's not hard to kill someone with a bullet so long as you can get off enough of them in short order. And it's not messy or personal like a knife or a baseball bat. It's quick and you don't need to get messy or even look at the mess very long if you don't want to.

But even if we take anger and fear off the table and instead put confident defense or deterrence in its place, the same temptation presents itself. I don't know how some of you gun owners were trained, but I was told when I was trained with a weapon that whenever you point a weapon at someone you must be ready to kill. First of all, you can pull a trigger impulsively and safeties aren't always on or don't always work. Even if you think the gun is not loaded it may be. And even if you're trying to wound, you're just as likely to hit an artery and the person will bleed to death.

So all this begs a question. Who, when and how may a Christian kill? It's a loaded question, isn't it? And the pun is definitely intended. And this question by the way has become acute since the emergence of what is sometimes called Stand Your Ground laws. Now that was theoretical to me until I met a woman named Lucy McBath whose 17 year-old son Jordan was killed outside one of these Quick Marts. You probably saw the story out of Florida. He and some boys were in a car, they were playing loud music, there was a guy with a gun in his glove compartment who told them to turn it down, they apparently may have gotten a little mouthy with him and he ended up firing ten bullets into the car killing Jordan who was as was the case with all those boys, completely unarmed.

And he is using and this has been used as a defense the fact that he felt his life was in mortal danger, therefore he had the right to use lethal force. Not that lethal...not that he truly was in mortal danger, just that he thought he was and that was enough.

Just a few weeks ago did you see the story of the pastor who shot two boys, killed one of them, when he found them on the roof of his church pulling copper tubing out of the cooling unit, apparently to resell and when they refused to get down off the roof he went to his car, pulled out his AR 15 and semiautomatic rifle, shot and killed one of the boys. So these are real questions, they're not theoretical. They are happening and they are happening in our world, in the church as much as anywhere else.

Now I addressed the question of self-defense in my book, Harry, I found it on your shelf so I don't even have a copy of this hardcover anymore. Thank you for letting me borrow it. Looks like it's well worn. I appreciate the effect anyway, but in any case I address the question of Christians killing in my study of the Ten Commandments and specifically on the commandment that prohibits murder and I make the case, there is not a commandment against killing in the broadest sense, there's no commandment against self-defense or killing in war or even capital punishment. No specific commandment. Now I would argue there are other controlling factors for these things. They include perhaps what I might call overrides like mercy over condemnation, love of enemy over vengeance but strictly speaking, Christians may kill under certain very restrictive circumstances. But the question is, who is the authority for these rules.

Well, I would hope most of us agree that it's the Word of God, the Bible, and a good, balanced, prayerful interpretation of the text and the model of Jesus Christ who is the word of god incarnate, the word made flesh. But sadly, Christians actually, statistically take their cues on this paramount question of willful

taking of human life, adult human life, we're still mostly pro-life, when it comes to the pre-born child, but for adult life we take our cues not from the Ten Commandments but from the Second Amendment. And from groups that champion a very liberal interpretation of the Second Amendment like the NRA.

Now as I said, I'm not anti-NRA and I'm not anti-gun, but I am anti idolatry and when we champion the Second Amendment as magnificent as the Constitution is, or someone's or some secular organization's interpretation of the Second Amendment over and above the word of God and over and above Jesus as the exemplar of that word, then we must be very careful that in respecting the Second Amendment we don't violate the Second Commandment.

It's too easy to exchange one Lord for another. When it comes to this question, the consequences are enormous. They are literally life and death. They reflect on the testimony of the gospel itself and certainly of the perception by others of God's people. People's opinions of the church, of pastors, of evangelists, of the message we bear. It's always easier for us to obey an earthly lord over a heavenly lord. Maybe that's why Jesus taught us to pray, remember when the disciples said, "Lord, teach us to pray." And you remember what he gave us, the Lord's Prayer, and in that prayer he said whenever you pray, whenever you pray, pray like this. Pray these things. And in there are those great words, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done." That's an affirmation of lordship, of making Christ, Lord of our lives, Lord of our decisions, Lord, master over our actions. And it keeps him lord daily whenever we pray, which leads me to my big concern in all of this and that's whenever Christians jump on a bandwagon without praying, without searching the scriptures,

without reflecting on lordship, it places in question who is really in charge. Who's giving the orders here? Who is issuing the directives? So who has the last say on Christians and guns? Who has the answer to when a Christian may employ lethal force? What is the solution?

Paul says it right here, back to Romans 13:11 our verse. "Put on the armor of light." What does Paul mean by this? If darkness is a metaphor for things that are anti-God, then light is the antithesis and represents all that is God and therefore all that is good. Light is the opposite of evil and wickedness, knaves, living translation renders Proverbs 13:9 as this, "The good man's life is full of light. The sinner's road is dark and gloomy." Light in this sense is the antidote to fear and ignorance. The Psalmist declares in 27:1, "The Lord is my light and my salvation. Whom shall I fear?" The Lord is the strength of my life. Of whom shall I be afraid? And 119:130, "The unfolding of your words gives light, it gives understanding to the simple." First John 1:9, "Christ is called the true light which enlightens everyone." And I already referenced verse five there, we're assured about this light that "the darkness has not overcome it."

So in putting on this armor, this protective light, we are enveloping ourselves in God, in His goodness, which in First Corinthians 15 tells us is the victory over sin, the grave, Satan himself. So all those things that push us on to an earthly solution, to an earthly source, to an earthly understanding, now takes us...is overridden if you will, and resolved in Christ and we can take confidence in that so if fear is driving people to arm themselves and to stockpile ammunition, or if it's hatred or vengeance that sends them out in pursuit of a perpetrator and it happens,

or if it's sin or pride or the desire to be powerful or dominant that is a motivating force behind some ostensible act of self-defense, then they are answered in this, in casting off what is not of God and not of faith, and putting on the glorious light of Christ, the one in whom John tells us in 1 and 4, was life and the life was the light of men, this is the answer on Christians and guns that I will give to our law and policymakers in Washington. I'm not going to deliver the NRA line or the Bloomberg line, or anyone else's line, the best answer, the best counsel, the best response is found in the written and living word of God. "The night is far gone," Paul says, "The day is at hand so then let us cast off the works of darkness"....fear, ignorance, hatred, vengeance, and put on the armor of light, the fruit of the spirit, as Paul enumerates them in Galatians 5, "love of neighbor and of enemy, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, self-control." The government can't control what is ultimately done or not done with a gun. But we can as we are enabled by the Holy Spirit which is the source of light. Let's pray.

"Holy God, Lord of light, help us to understand, dispel in us darkness and shine the light of your glory into our souls, into our minds, into our hearts, into our living. Help us, Lord, to know you, the light of life, and all that you bring with it. Increase our own understanding of this your word in this hour of crisis and need. We pray in Jesus, life giving and light giving name, hallelujah. Amen and amen.

Pastor.