

Our appetites and our lives (Romans 13:11-14)

Paul has some quite specific recommendations about our preparedness for the day of salvation.

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Sometime after 9/11 someone created a website called Things to do While Waiting for the World to End. It included these suggestions:

- Understand that you will not accomplish all the goals you set for yourself. The end of the world is not a good time to begin refinishing your floors.
- Stop lying to yourself. Don't say you're going to read *War and Peace* or that book by Stephen Hawking.
- Forget about knowing the names of the newest Survivors, maintaining a Christmas card list, staying up to date on insurance payments, etc.
- If the world is coming to an end, you might as well relax.

Apocalyptic biblical texts have quite a different message. The day of salvation is sooner than we think. So be alert; be prepared.

In this Romans text, Paul has some quite specific recommendations about our preparedness. Don't participate, he says, in

Reveling (NIV: orgies). Jesus liked a good party. What Paul proscribes here is behavior that appeals to the animal nature in humans, thereby debasing them and making them less than what God intended.

Drunkenness. This doesn't proscribe the consumption of alcohol. The problem is when we drink to excess and become a danger to ourselves and others.

Debauchery: The Greek word here literally means *bed*; it means having illicit sexual relations with whomever, whenever. The early Christian community, in contrast to its pagan context in which it existed, was known for chaste sexual relations, although 1 Corinthians suggests some exceptions to this.

Licentiousness: This likely underscores the concern about debauchery, but the word actually refers specifically to engaging in questionable behavior without shame.

Quarreling: This grows out of an attempt to get ahead, always be right, have one's own way. It leads to dissension in the community of faith. This is quite contrary to *agape*: looking out for the wellbeing of others, for the common good, rather than putting oneself at the forefront.

Jealousy: This means wanting what others have and you sense you lack: possessions, position, status. It is related to a sense of self-worth—and it is an occasion for reminding ourselves that we are all created in the image of God and are beloved children of God, and therefore we are divinely valued human beings.

Two points to ponder. First, the way we deal with our human appetites (food, drink) and needs (self-worth, intimacy) is pretty much the way we live our lives, consciously or unconsciously. There's a reason why they are called human drives.

Second, it is doubtful that any spiritual renewal can happen, individual or corporate, without circumspection on these matters that Paul enumerates.

By his own admission Augustine led a youthful life of debauchery and licentiousness, despite being raised by a devout mother. One day, in a period of desperation, while tearfully walking through a garden, he asked himself: "How long: How long? Tomorrow and tomorrow—why not now?" Then he heard a voice, as if from a child: "Take and read; take and read." When he returned to the place where he had been sitting in the garden, a Bible was opened to these verses from Romans 13, and he was converted.

Maybe it's time for the church to recover a word (and concept) that has fallen out of favor: *holiness*.