

WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH



SERMON

September 6, 2026

Wake Up

Rev. Jason Freyer

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Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: September 6, 2026

Cruel roommates

In college, I was...well, not the best student. One morning, the morning of a final exam, I woke up late. The exam was scheduled for 9:00 AM, and I looked at my clock as it flashed 8:48. It was a ten minute walk to campus, so I figured if I ran I would be ok. So I threw on some dirty gym shorts and a ratty t-shirt, and booked it across campus.

When I arrived for my final at 8:59, there was no one in the room. No professor, no classmates, nothing. There is just no way I was that late, right? Now kids, this was back when the only place you could get the internet was in the computer lab, so I made my way there, hammered out a quick email to my professor apologizing, asking what I could do to make it up, and really just doing as much groveling as the digital age will allow.

I then walked back across campus to my apartment, where my roommates were up laughing at me. As a prank, they had set every clock in my room ahead an hour, which means that when I thought it was 8:48, it was really 7:48. And now that I was back in my apartment at 9:45, it was really 8:45. And that's the story of how I was late to the same final twice!

There are few worse feelings in the world than sleeping in. It's a mixture of the groggy feeling of just waking up, plus the urgency from deep down, I just hate the way it all comes together. But what Paul is asking us today in our text is this:

are we sleeping in? Are we asleep to what we've been called to as a church, as believers, and as bearers of the divine image? Let's explore a bit.

Owe no one anything.

The lectionary actually skipped over a second if you were paying attention last week. Usually I can see why the compilers of the lectionary decided to skip something. In this case, the section they skip has to do with listening to the government and when and to whom you should pay your taxes, so I think the lectionary folks decided to spare us preachers what could be a rather controversial Sunday.

But Paul ends that portion of the letter talking about who is owed what. In verse seven it says "Pay to all what is due them: taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due."

Which then leads in to our section today: Owe no one anything except to love one another.

This may be hard for our American ears to hear. The stats I could pull up from 2019 are staggering. In that year, Americans held \$12.8 trillion in mortgage debt, \$1.64 trillion in auto loans, \$1.63 trillion in student loans, and \$1.18 trillion in credit card debt. We owe a lot of people a lot of things.

Paul says we shouldn't live like that, but rather the only thing we should owe folks is our love. "Owe no one anything, except to love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law."

Though, maybe our indebtedness as an American culture can help us out. If I decided this month to just not pay my mortgage, I just decided that doing so wasn't important to me, how do you think that would go? Or maybe I decide that I'm going to pay my mortgage, but the way I want, so I'm going to send in all the boys leftover Hot Wheels cars, because surely they're worth something, right? How would that go? Or perhaps I decide that I'm going to outsource it, and have someone else pay my mortgage for me. They're more wealthy than I am anyway, let them take care of it, right? In any of these scenarios, I would likely lose my house!

Yet so often that's the response of Christians to this idea of loving their neighbors. We say things like "I don't think that people group is worthy of love, so I'm just not going to do it." Or "I'm going to love my neighbors, but I'm going to do it on my own terms, in my own way, and see how that goes." Sometimes I even hear "I'm not the best at being loving or caring, but we have these great pastors at Westminster, so we'll just rely on them to love our neighbors." That's...that's not how it works, Paul says. We owe one another our love.

The power of love.

In fact, Paul says this kind of love is quite powerful. It can fulfill the law. A commentator I was reading this week pointed out that if we were actually able to love completely and fully, we would have no need for the law. Any law, really! We have speed limits because I can't be trusted enough to love my neighbor's safety more than my own desire to get where I'm going quickly. We have laws about theft because we don't love our neighbors enough to not take what they have. In fact, anything in our laws that has to do with fairness is at its core because we don't know how to love each other well enough to keep things fair on our own.

If we could just love perfectly, we would have no need for any of these laws. In fact, we would need only one.

A watchword.

Paul says a familiar idea, that we ought to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. I find it fascinating that Paul brings this up here. Of course, the phrase has been around from the Torah, so they would be familiar with it. Jesus just happened to make it a pillar of his ministry, one on which hang the law and the prophets. Paul wrote his letter to the Romans in 56 AD or so, and the Gospels, where Jesus underlines "love your neighbor as yourself," those were written between 68-100 AD.

What that tells me is that early on in the Christian community, this idea that we ought to center on loving our neighbors as ourselves became a *watchword* long before it was ever written down. Professor Andrew Root writes that too often the Church is interested in mission statements, rather than on this idea of watchwords. He defines a watchword as “shorthand for a story of a deep experience that has shaped a group of people. The person with the watchword is called to watch with that word, to look at the world and interact with the world in and through this shorthand story.”

So imagine the early church making a watchword out of this: Love your neighbor as yourself. It’s short, but it points to a deep experience. It’s easy to carry around with you, and it helps you watch out for what’s going on in the world. It’s a reminder that we can carry with us everywhere we go.

I don’t know yet what the watchword for our community here at Westminster could be, I think we’re still sorting that out. But love your neighbor as yourself, that’s got to be in the running.

Wake up

Paul then pivots, and says that it’s time for us to wake up. I’ve wondered why Paul would put this in his letter, particularly right after this section on loving your neighbor as yourself. Far as I can tell, like a college sophomore, it seems that the church

in Rome has been sleeping through their obligation to love. They've kind of lost track of what time it is. They've lost their urgency for love, and Paul wants them to wake up from this.

Actually, maybe a more accurate analogy would be to say that sometimes we are all sleep walking our way through love. When you're sleep walking, you're moving through the world, but you're not really paying attention to what's going on.

A few weeks ago, we went as a family on a vacation to North Carolina. A friend loaned us a house in their beach community, and so we excitedly made our way right after the 11:00 service. I drove the whole eleven hours to the beach house, and I'll be honest, I wasn't paying attention to much that was happening around me. Have you had this? Where you arrive at your destination and think "I don't remember getting here..."

But, the house we were staying in was right on a golf course, and so when we were driving home, I noticed that there was a golf ball sized hole in the glass roof of my car. My dad taught me that you shouldn't drive with a chip in your glass, because it can get worse and shatter. But, we still had an eleven hour drive home to finish. So you can better believe I was more attentive to what was going on around me on that drive home. Every single sound that happened in the car that could even slightly be confused for cracking glass, I was on it. Every road hazard that could be kicked up and make it worse, I was attuned to. When it started to sprinkle rain, I said many

prayers that the water would stay on the outside of the vehicle. I think I was attentive enough that I could see the Matrix...

Paul is saying here, please, make sure that we never do that when it comes to the way we love our neighbors. We can't sleep walk our way through that. We need to wake up. We need to be attentive to what's going on around us. We need to be aware of who needs love. We need to bring some urgency to it.

Urgency in love.

I think there are at least three ways we need to bring some understanding of love, and to wake up from sleep.

First, we need to *urgently expand our understanding of "neighbor"*. The sleep walking believer understands their "neighbor" in a very narrow sense, and so they can sleep walk right past everyone else. If you don't look like me, think like me, act like me, believe like me, then I don't really have to worry about you. And more troubling, our culture at present seems insistent that we keep shrinking our idea of neighbor. The echo chambers are getting smaller and smaller so that we're never exposed to the viewpoints or needs of our neighbors.

Instead to wake up is to keep expanding our understanding of neighbor. It's to realize that everyone is made in the image of God. It's to realize that we will never, absolutely never, look into the eyes of someone God does not love. It's to realize that the watchword doesn't put the same restrictions on neighbor that we seem to. It is to realize that everyone, including those we might label as our enemies, are deserving of God's love, and of ours.

Secondly, to wake up is to *lean on love as a verb*. The sleep walking believer confuses love for an emotion. Emotions require very little from us, actually. I can feel a certain emotional love for everyone on the planet, and do that rather comfortably from the couch in my living room. I can feel a certain emotional love for everyone on the planet, and do nothing to tend for their needs. I can feel a certain emotional love for everyone on the planet, and keep looking out for myself as number one.

Instead, when we wake up we know that love is a verb. It requires action. Love requires us to move our feet, to be in the game. Love requires us to seek out our neighbor, not just feel a certain way about them. Love requires us to put flesh and bone on our feelings. And love requires action.

Lastly, we need to *make love a priority*. The sleep walking believer has a priority list, but doesn't really feel the need to put love on the list. I've actually hear something like this from

brothers and sisters before: “Why do we need to claim we’re going to be for this group or that group or...why don’t we just say we’ll love everybody and call it a day?”

I’ve come to learn in life that if I don’t actually name my priorities, it’s very unlikely that I’m ever going to live in to them. I can hope for the best all I want, but if I don’t make a priority out of my prayer life, I know it’s not going to happen by accident. I can dream all I want, but if I don’t make a priority of cleaning my house I’m going to come home to a mess every day. I can claim to be about love all I want, but if I don’t name it as a priority, I’m not going to stumble into it. We wake up when we can name loving our neighbor as ourselves as a priority. We wake up when we make it our watchword, when it orients how we move through the world. We wake up when we make it an intention. We wake up when we can answer this question every night before we go to bed: who have I loved today?

Put on Christ.

I think about that final, that I took wearing those same crumpled gym shorts and dirty t-shirt:

If they say that you are supposed to dress for success, my sleeping in and being late twice for the same exam didn’t help me do that. If what you wear is the first thing people notice about you, it’s going to leave a mark right? That day my

clothing choices reflected that I wasn't there to do serious work. (And you know, the grade on that particular exam confirmed that suspicion). What does it look like to put on our very best? Paul tells us: we ought to wear Christ.

This is so much bigger than just asking "What would Jesus Do," or trying simply imitate Christ. It's to live like Christ so much that it's the first thing people see about you. It's to love like Christ so much that it reflects your choices in this world. It's to be so like Christ that people can't help but notice.

How do we do that? We wake up to the needs of our neighbors, and we love them as we love ourselves. We live in to the watchword that Jesus gave us.

Blessing

So friends, may you never have roommates cruel enough to prank you like mine did. More so, may you be fully awake to what is going on in the world. May you love your neighbor as yourself, and may you carry it as your watchword in this world. May you put on Christ, such that it's the first thing that people see when they see you. And may you put on Christ, so that you know that any love we have to give this world is there because he first loved us.



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
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2040 Washington Road
Pittsburgh, PA 15241
412-835-6630

www.westminster-church.org