

‘A CULTURE OF LOVE’ ROMANS 13:8-14

[St Mark’s Northbridge, Sunday March 13, 2022 – All Services]

1. Love & Predictable Sermons.

You might have seen the title of this sermon on your outline just now and wondered whether you’ve travelled back in time, or whether I’m becoming a little bit senile. Haven’t we already had a sermon in this series called ‘A Culture of Love’? Indeed we have. February 20- A Culture of Sincere Love, Romans 12:9-13. And in fact, originally the title for the sermon a week after that was ‘A Culture of Sincere Love – Part 2’. But then I changed it to a Culture of Mercy. But it could easily have gone ahead with its original title. Because Paul has talked a lot about love already in these two chapter of Romans. So you may well ask why he’s still going on about it at the end of chapter 13? Well, that’s a question for the apostle not me! Though I suspect he might say it has something to do with how important it is. But whatever his answer might be, the fact is we have today/tonight another passage and another sermon about love.

And this is not just a feature of Romans 12-13 is it? Here’s a Facebook meme I saw this week. [Slide] It’s a snapshot of 16 different verses in the New Testament that all say the same thing. Love each other. And Romans 13:8 is just one of the verses listed. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that love is a major theme in the Bible. You might even say it’s a predictable theme.

And this, sisters and brothers, is the danger we face together this morning/evening. Whenever we come to a predictable theme or exhortation in Scripture there’s a risk that we will tune out through over familiarity. And I’ve been very conscious of this as I’ve prepared to preach this week. Because the last thing I want to do is offer you a sermon today that follows a well-worn path so that all you hear is something you feel like you’ve heard in the same way on many previous occasions. And the last thing I want you to do today is to switch off because that’s what you’re expecting. So what I want to say at the outset today/tonight is that I think Paul’s last two paragraphs in Romans 13 have some genuinely interesting things to say about love. I think in these verses he invites us to look upon love from some unusual angles. And I think that as we do that, we’ll be pressed into thinking some stimulating thoughts. Even more importantly, I think we’ll be moved to love as Jesus loves. So, stick with me and I think the Lord will reward us.

What I want to share with you this morning/evening are the 5 angles on love that I think Paul offers us here- 5 perspectives on love that I've tried to capture in the headings on your outline.

[Pray]

2. Love & Debt (13:8).

Firstly- love and debt. In verse 7 at the end of the previous paragraph Paul talked about the debt every Christian has to the governing authorities- the obligation to pay taxes and give respect etc. And this thought then runs into his next paragraph. Paul urges his readers to make sure they meet all their obligations, including those mentioned in verse 7. But he points out that there is one obligation we can never completely meet, one 'debt' we can never clear. This is a debt that is always before us- the debt of love. Verse 8.

[Read 13:8a]

I suspect we don't think of love in these terms very often. The pattern of this world says that love is an impulse. It's something that arises within us and which we follow by instinct. The pattern of the world says that love is a bond you have with the people that you're closest too. But God says that love is something we owe to our neighbours. In this sense it's not just something within us, but something that comes from outside of us, from God himself. And it constrains us to give ourselves to the needs of others. And to keep doing so. Because a continuing debt calls for continuing love.

Debt is an idea that we usually view negatively. But this debt is God's gift to us. Because it's a debt he lays upon us for our good and for the good of the people around us. And it's good for us because it's mutual- others are indebted to us as we are indebted to them. And it's good for us because it's a far happier way to live than the life of self-service and self-protection that we see so many living in the world around us.

Let no debt remain outstanding except the continuing debt to love one another.

3. Love & The Law (13:8-10).

Secondly, love and the law. We pick it up half way through verse 8.

[Read 13:8b-10]

Paul doesn't say these things because he believes that Christians have an obligation to keep the Old Testament law¹. But, he wants us to see that his teaching about love is entirely consistent with what the law of Moses called for. He wants us to understand that God didn't expect one thing under the old covenant and a whole new thing under the new covenant. Rather, just as Jesus fulfilled the law in himself², so too his people fulfil the law when they walk in Christ's ways.

And this is important because when Paul summarises the law at the end of verse 9 he's quoting two sources simultaneously. He's referring at the same time to the ancient book of Leviticus³ and to the words of Jesus in the gospels⁴. So what Paul teaches is consonant not only with the ancient law but also with the teaching of our Saviour.

And there's an important thing being said here that we must not miss. We must love our neighbours, yes. But when we commit adultery, or murder, or steal, or covet, and the list could go on; when we sin against our neighbours in these ways we are failing to love. And we fail to love, verse 10 says, because these sins cause others harm. And you can't love someone if you're harming them, if you're working against them in some way⁵. These sins, you see, are not just disobedience towards God, they are a failure of love towards others.

And it seems to me that these are the kinds of words likely to start a fire in our society today. Because the pattern of the world is to say that each person should go after whatever they desire. The pattern of the world is to say that if you find there's something about your life that makes you unhappy then go after something different. Interestingly, our world still generally wouldn't go so far as to say people should steal or murder to get what they want. But I suspect coveting isn't widely seen as a sin. And we have an ambiguous relationship with adultery too in my opinion.

In a world where sexual freedom is seen as a virtue, and where leaving behind an unsatisfying relationship for a new one is seen as brave and authentic, I think we sometimes do hear adultery, and other forms of sexual immorality, being justified in the name of love. Perhaps, like me, you've found yourself watching a TV show or a movie or reading a book, and being encouraged to feel sympathy for the character who pursues a relationship like this? What God calls immoral, the world often calls love.

¹See Romans 7:1-6, for example.

² Romans 10:4

³ Leviticus 19:18

⁴ Eg. Matthew 22:39

⁵ This latter phrase is a more literal rendering of the original Greek.

But this is precisely the thought that Paul seeks to unravel here. God says that sexual immorality, and many other sins, are the very antithesis of love. In the world we hear people ask- who does it hurt? But God says here, sin always harms. In the world we hear “love is love” as if that’s a knock-down argument in favour of any kind of relationship. But God says here, all sin is in fact the failure to love. And we mustn’t miss this thought. It’s kind of an incendiary idea, don’t you think?

4. Love & The Present Time (13:11-12).

Thirdly, love and the present time. Because in verse 11 the subject hasn’t changed. Paul writes- ‘And do this, understanding the present time’. What’s the ‘this’? It’s love of course. It’s what Paul has just been talking about. Love your neighbour. And love them, he says, understanding the present time.

And the present time, according to Paul, is a time deeply shaped by the future. The future- when our salvation, verse 11, is finally revealed. The future- when the day arrives, verse 12, the day when Christ returns and the whole world is bathed in his light. In the future Jesus’ will come back to save us from this world and its darkness. And when he does it will be like the sunrise. It will be like that Alinta Energy ad a couple of years back where a few Australian cricketers flicked a switch and the back yard flood lights came on- the difference between night and day.

And so, Paul says, the present time is the time shaped by our knowledge of what lies ahead. According to verse 11 this is the hour that has already come. It’s the hour for being awake and ready. It’s the hour to put aside the deeds of darkness and to put on the armour of light. This is the future breaking into the present. This is the light to come illuminating the days in which we live right now.

And the key exhortation here is this: ‘wake up from your slumber’. Be alert! Because Christ is near. This is offering our bodies as a living sacrifice not just because of Christ’s mercy in the past, but also because of Christ’s grace in the near future.

And Paul’s point is that we won’t live the life of love if we’re sleepy. We’ll love others as we should only when we’re fully alert- when we’re awake. So wake up! This is Paul’s exhortation.

The pattern of the world says that the present time is for seizing the day- seizing the day for your own happiness. The pattern of the world says that the present time is for setting up your future- for yourself and for your children if you have them. But God says, the present time is for alertness- alertness that means we can love the people around us. God says that the future is secure in Christ, and this frees us. It free us to pour ourselves out for the sake of others more than for ourselves.

5. Love & Decency (13:13).

And so, fourthly, love and decency. This is an unexpected word I think. But it's the word Paul chooses to summarise what it means to live well in the present time. It's the word he uses to speak of what it means to live in the day not the night. We are to behave 'decently'.

It sounds to us like such an old-fashioned word, even Victorian and repressive. What does it mean? Well it simply means to live in a way that's proper given the times we're. It means to live in the daylight.

What this rules out is all kinds of indecent. It rules out the kind of night time living which is fuelled by alcohol and sexual desire. But it also rules out the dark night of relationships that are torn apart through the power of envy and bitter conflict. Verse 13.

[Read 13:13]

These are clear and present dangers are they not? The kinds of behaviour this verse describes are everywhere around us, and sometimes amongst us. But they are deeds of darkness. And they enslave us.

Which is why Paul's call to decency is not a repression. It's the opposite. It's the call to be free. It's the call to choose the liberty of the day over the tragedy and brokenness of the night. It's the call to throw off the captivity of meeting our own desires, and to live instead in the joy of love.

Some of you may have heard of a man named Augustine. [Slide] He was born in the 4th century after Christ. And he came to be one of the most influential early Christian thinkers. But he wasn't always a Christian. And in his book simply called 'Confessions' he tells the story of how he came to Christ at age 33. As a young man he lived a very licentious life. By his own admission he was a man of fierce lusts. And his unchecked desires left a trail of jealousies and fractured relationships in his wake. But at age 33 he was suddenly stopped in his tracks. He had learnt the Bible as a boy but had rejected Christ's way in his teenage years. But on one particular day, sitting in a garden pondering what his life had become, he thought he heard the voice of a young child telling him to pick up a Bible and read it. So he did. And he first found a verse in Matthew 19 telling him to give up everything and follow Jesus⁶. And then he turned over several pages and came to these verses in Romans 13⁷.

⁶ Matthew 19:21

⁷ See [The Conversion of Saint Augustine \(earlychurchhistory.org\)](http://www.earlychurchhistory.org)

[Read 13:13-14a]

And those verses spoke to him. And he heard in them the voice of Christ calling him back. He heard Jesus inviting him to offer himself to God as a living sacrifice in view of his mercy. And from that day on his life completely changed.

And perhaps there are some here today who need to hear the voice of Christ calling to them in these verses in exactly the same way?

But, of course, these verses are not just for those who have given themselves up to the deeds of darkness. These verses are for every Christian woman, man, and child. They remind us that the pattern of the world is to offer satisfaction and happiness in things that fill our hearts with darkness. But God seeks to free us from such things by reminding us that the way of love is the daytime of decency.

6. Love & Jesus Christ (13:14).

And so, fifthly, love and Jesus Christ. Because what Augustine heard that day in the garden was not just the call of God to stop doing foolish and harmful things. He also heard the sweet invitation of Jesus to come to him, and to be clothed in him.

And this invitation is made to every one of us. To come to Jesus to be wrapped up in him. To put on his righteousness in place of our unrighteousness. To be seen by God dressed in his purity and wisdom rather than our sin and folly. And to be renewed by the Spirit of Jesus, from the inside out, so that our character becomes more and more like his character. Like Paul said back in 12:2- transformed by the renewing of our minds.

And the important of the mind is on view again here. The end of verse 14 says that those who are clothed with Christ don't even think about how to gratify their sinful desires. Of course, our lives are often full of contradiction here aren't they? Certainly I find myself thinking these thoughts. And sometimes I even console myself that it's OK to think about such things as long as I don't do them. But no. Jesus, in all his holy purity, calls us into a life where we flee from even the thought of jealous revenge, from even the thought of an argumentative comeback, from even the thought of drinking more than we should, and from even the thought of sexual impropriety. And if you, like me, struggle with these thoughts, then like me you need to pray that God would deliver you from them, that he would fill your mind with the righteousness of Christ. Because this is where transformation begins and flourishes.

So let me conclude. These are interesting verses I think. And these angles on the life of love really do help to renew our minds. They show us again how different love really is from what the pattern of the world suggests. They encourage us to see love as a debt we owe to the people around us, and a joyful debt that will follow us all the days of our lives. They encourage us to see that if we want to love, then we need to make sure we don't sin. They challenge the idea that there are sins which don't harm. And they urge us to love others by doing what God commands. They urge us to embrace this way of life because our salvation is nearer now than it's ever been. And they call on us not to be sleepy or dull, but to see the light breaking in from Christ's eternal kingdom, illuminating the way we're to walk every day. They encourage us to wake up, to be fully alert, that we might see the opportunities to love that are always before us, and to love generously and decently.

What these verses ultimately do is encourage us to come again to Jesus. And to clothe ourselves with him. What an evocative phrase that is! What an alluring proposition. Christ Jesus whose every act and word was steeped in love. Christ Jesus who gave himself up to death in love. Christ Jesus who loved us then and loves us now. He offers us not just the benefits of his love, but his love itself- to be ours. To be our cloak, our comfort, our protection, and our pattern of life.

I hope that you want to love like Jesus loves. I do. And incredibly, he has made this possible for us. He renews our mind. He's done that again this morning/evening. And he transforms our lives to be like his life.

[Read 13:13-14a]