

10 September 8 and 10 am at St Peter's Church 2023

Exodus 12:1 – 14; Romans 13:8 – 14; Matthew 18:15 – 20

Our reading in Exodus was about God giving instructions around Passover. This was the last plague before Pharaoh allowed the people of Israel to leave Egypt. It was where a perfect lamb was sacrificed, and the blood was put on the door frames of the homes of the people of Israel. A foreshadowing as we now realise of Jesus becoming our perfect lamb and sacrificing his life. The meal was eaten in a hurry and became a yearly time of remembrance, a festival to the LORD that every generation would observe. It signified their response to God's eternal promise to save them by their ***being ready to demonstrate faithfulness to the God of love*** at a moment's notice.

In our passage in Romans 13, Paul, writing to the Church in Rome fourteen centuries after Moses and twenty years after the crucifixion of Jesus, states that it is time for Christians to be alert, to be fully awake and aware of the critical and difficult times they were living in. Some, including Paul possibly felt the second return of Christ was imminent. For Paul, Romans 13:8 "Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another" **is what faithfulness towards God looks like now for the emerging Christian church.**¹ Paul says that loving others fulfils the law. He wants Christians to be fully living the principles of Jesus or as he puts it, to be 'clothed with the Lord Jesus Christ. He wants them to fulfil highest moral living in direct contrast to the low morals of many of the Romans of that time. The Mosaic law commanded 'do not commit adultery, do not murder, do not steal, do not covet'. All of this is lived out in practice by doing no harm to one's neighbour and, like Jesus, by thinking of the higher good of others.

This text has challenged many over the years as the standard in following Jesus is to love as he loved with compassion and intention. Love as Paul means here, speaks more of attitudes and actions, a deliberate choice rather than an emotion that comes and goes.

Is that kind of love easy? I don't think so, especially as Romans 13:9 goes on to tell us that 'the commandments ... are summed up in this one command: "Love your neighbour as yourself."

Even that statement can be problematic.

What does it mean to love ourselves? Far too often we make statements about ourselves or about others putting down our talents and abilities, our looks etc. For some, hurts from the past can mean genuine healing is needed to have a godly love for self. In one sense many more of us automatically love ourselves – our default setting is naturally to look out for our own selfish interests. Loving ourselves too much can leave us reluctant to move out of our comfort zone to care about others. We see that in the Good Samaritan story where the priest and the Levite avoided the injured man. They were concerned for themselves – perhaps their comfort, perhaps their status or image before others was in their minds.

God has a higher standard in mind. When God looks at us, His adopted sons and daughters, He knows that we're sinful yet views and treats us like He views and treats Jesus Christ, His only natural Son. He loves us. So now His expectation is that we seek to act in ways consistent with the way he views and treats us.² He wants us to treat others as we already treat ourselves.

Romans 13:10 tells us 'Love does no harm to a neighbour.' A perhaps even bigger insight comes from verses such as **John 13:34–35**,

“A new command I give you: Love one another. **As I have loved you**, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” Our love for others is to flow out of God’s love for us - of knowing and believing, that like Christ, we are unconditionally loved by God.

As we walk in that knowledge we are enabled to honour, respect, care for each other – including those still on the journey towards faith in God.

Reading the Gospels gives us many examples of Christ showing love to others – despite hunger, tiredness, grief, ridicule, and more. Christ loved to the ultimate – He, the sinless one, the Son of God, willingly gave His life in sacrifice for us so that we could be reconciled with God. One example of this is when Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. Mark 7:24 states to have some time to himself – perhaps to grieve the loss of his cousin John the Baptist – but he still met the need of the Syrophonecian woman whose daughter needed healing.

Our Matthew reading today is challenging because it causes us to look at our definition of love again. We need to balance compassion and truth. Perhaps they are two sides of the same coin.

Matthew 18:15 states “If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. Different Bible versions have ‘sins, sin, wrongs, faults’. This passage speaks of someone who has wronged us and in another passage of Scripture we are reminded that if we come to the altar and there remember that someone has something against us, we should seek to put it right.

Many believers find this hard. It is often easier to gossip, run the person who has wronged us down to our friends, anything rather than face the person privately. Sadly, churches have lost members over people wanting to avoid conflict, over unresolved issues between members or with a leader. Sometimes it is because we are afraid of the person, sometimes it may be because we can't see how we can show the compassion and grace of God while dealing with our own feelings of hurt. I strongly believe this is an aspect of love that God wants us to learn and practice. **Easy, no! For the sake of relationship worthwhile, Yes!**

Jesus knew his disciples well and knows our hearts well too.

Matthew 18 is full of stories Jesus shared with them which may help us. He took a young child, placed the child amongst them and told them to repent and be like young children. The Amplified Bible says young children are 'trusting, lowly, loving, forgiving' unless someone causes them to stumble. Then he told the story of a shepherd losing one of his sheep and searching earnestly for the lost one until it was found. In that context he tells us to put things right when someone wrongs us. Like the lost sheep, the relationship being restored is far more valuable than a temporary possible blow to our pride. Either way we need to seek restoration and reconciliation. The preferred option is to go privately, one on one but that escalates to others being included if the offender doesn't listen. Things not put right have a wider impact than just ourselves. It is not easy to go to someone or to have someone come to us. I have been on both sides of this as probably many of you have been. Bishop Justin has shared on several occasions that hurt people usually hurt others. He believes we need to take our hurts to God, so we are healed and then able to be a blessing to others.

Two keys which may prove helpful are to go to God and ask for His love, peace and grace to flood our hearts. This enables us to either, graciously forgive the person who has wronged us or to humbly receive the word someone is bravely sharing with us without over-reacting.

There's a further wonderful blessing when we are reconciled with a fellow believer. We quote Matthew 18:19 – 20 quite often but within its context here it is a special blessing for us in our potential conflict times. I am reading it in in the Amplified Bible.

'Again I tell you, if two of you on earth agree (harmonize together, make a symphony together) about whatever [anything and everything] they may ask, it will come to pass and be done for them by My Father in heaven. For wherever two or three are gathered (drawn together as My followers) in My Name, there I AM in the midst of them.'

God, the I AM, with us to help us relate well together. What a blessing.

Will we seek God's grace in our difficult situations with others so we can intentionally choose to love with his compassion and kindness?

¹. Based on notes I read by Keith Grogg Montreat Presbyterian Church Montreat, NC September 10, 2017

2. Bratt, Doug, Center for Excellence in Preaching, Commentary Romans 13:8 – 14, for Sept 6th, 2020, adapted

Also

Working Preacher, Commentary on Romans 13:8-14, Mark Reasoner, Sept 7th, 2008

Working Preacher, Commentary on Matthew 18:15 – 20, Carl Jacobsen, Sept 4th, 2011

Bible hub, Ellicott's Commentary for English Readers on Romans 13: 11 – 12