

Love, the Law and the Coming Day

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[0:00] Thank you for the welcome this morning and it's good to be here with you. And just a brief kind of overview before we have our reading. And for those of you that have been here through the whole series, you might recognise some of the flow of this letter to the Romans.

It was written by Paul when he was in Corinth, sent to the church in Rome, which was a mixed congregation of Jewish and Gentile Christians. And there was a bit of tension between these two groups and Jewish believers treasured their rituals, their Jewish rituals, and incorporated parts of that into their newfound faith.

The Gentile Christians were questioning, well, why is this necessary? And so we come across this in this recurring theme in a lot of the New Testament churches.

Paul in his letter starts with what you might say is bad news. Every one of us has sinned, he says, and whether we're Jew or Gentile, whether we're religious or not, whether we're respectable or not, we all fall short of God's glory.

And that, says Paul, is a problem. But then comes wonderful good news. We're not made right with God by trying harder or by being better.

[1:25] We're justified by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. And then Paul moves beyond forgiveness and onto transformation.

And the Holy Spirit, he says, transforms us, changes us from the inside out, enabling us to live lives that honour God.

And so, Paul says, the Christian life is not just about getting to heaven one day. It's about being more Christ-like today. And finally, the letter explores how the gospel shapes relationships in the church and in society.

And Christians are called to live humbly, to love sacrificially, to welcome one another despite differences that we might have. And to offer ourselves as living sacrifices to God.

And chapter 13, where our reading comes from, continues that practical theme of how we should live as Christians.

[2:35] And so, Ros is going to bring our reading now. Thank you, Ros. So, the reading is from Paul's letter to the Romans, chapter 13, verses 7 to 14.

Give to everyone what you owe them. If you owe taxes, pay taxes. If revenue, then revenue. If respect, then respect.

If honour, then honour. Let no debt remain outstanding. Accept the continuing debt to love one another. For whoever loves others has fulfilled the law.

The commandments, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not covet. And whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command. Love your neighbour as yourself. Love does no harm to a neighbour. Therefore, love is the fulfilment of the law. And do this, understanding the present time.

[3:49] The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over.

The day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armour of light. Let us behave decently as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy.

Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh. This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God. So it's quiz day today, so before we get into this reading, a show of hands please.

Who enjoys reading a good novel when they're away on holiday? Oh wow, very good. Forget the holidays. Anyone here read a newspaper daily?

[5:06] Cover to cover? Not quite, okay. Anyone here read instruction manuals? Men, put your hands down.

Yeah, and what about reading stuff on your phone? Anyone read stuff on your phone? The Bible? Yeah. Emails? Text messages? Church WhatsApp group?

Yeah? Okay. Put your hands up if you've ever started a book and never finished it. Yeah? Very good. Anyone here regularly skips to the last chapter to see what happens, and then reads the rest of the book, knowing, yeah, yeah, my wife does it every single book she reads.

Bizarre to me, but yeah. Some books are easy reads, aren't they? A detective novel maybe, a travel guide, maybe even a good autobiography.

But then there are books that demand a bit more. And for many of us, I guess, Romans sits firmly in that second category.

[6:14] But it's not difficult because Paul just wanted to confuse us. He's opening our eyes to life-changing revelation.

The greatest news the world has ever heard. And I hope you are enjoying this series, which I think is coming to an end pretty soon. Let's just pray, shall we?

Father, as we come this morning, we come with curiosity and with humility and with expectancy. And Lord, we pray that your written word and the spoken word would become a living word in our hearts and our lives.

Thank you, Lord. Amen. Amen. So I know in recent weeks you've been looking at some of these chapters that really can stretch our minds and sometimes make us feel a bit uncomfortable.

[7:20] And I think today's passage, in some ways, is another one of those. It has an implicit reference to obedience. A word which is kind of out of fashion a little bit at the moment.

We like to celebrate independence and self-expression and doing life my way. But obedience, even the word itself sometimes, can make us bristle a bit.

Perhaps it reminds us of childhood when maybe a parent said something like, do what I say because that's what I say. And we just wanted to do the exact opposite.

And I think there's something in many of us that resists being told what to do. But when Paul speaks about obedience, he's not talking about a reluctant compliance through gritted teeth.

He's describing something much deeper. Something that gets to the very heart of the Christian life. In Romans chapter 7, Paul writes these wonderfully honest words.

[8:35] I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do, I do not do. But what I hate, I do.

Thank goodness for his honesty. Here's the great Apostle Paul admitting that he struggles. And his frustration comes because he desperately wants to do the right thing.

He wants to obey. And the struggle is between a changed heart and a fallen nature that still pulls us in an opposite direction.

And if we're honest, I guess this affects many of us. But deep down, for a Christian, there is a genuine longing to please the Lord, even when we fail.

And the psalmist understood this long before Paul. I'm just going to quickly go through some verses in Psalm 119. There's an obvious delight for David, the writer, of loving God's law and meditating on it and treasuring it.

[9:53] Just a few verses. Verse 10, I seek you with all my heart. Do not let me stray from your commands. Verse 16, I delight in your decrees.

I will not neglect your word. Verse 20, Your soul is consumed with longing for your laws at all times. Verse 24, Your statutes are my delight.

They are my counsellors. Verse 33, Teach me, O Lord, to follow your decrees. Then I will keep them to the end. 34, Give me understanding and I will keep your law and obey it with all my heart. Verse 44, I've put my hope in your laws. I will obey your law forever and ever. And I could go on forever and ever.

Psalm 119 is very long. A hundred and however many verses. This longing to obey is one of the marks of someone who truly belongs to God.

[11:03] And they, maybe, there's someone here this morning and you think, oh, hang on. I'm not sure about that, Martin. Aren't we people of grace? Aren't we free from the law?

That's a great question. And the answer is yes, we are. We are people of grace. We are free from the law. But we need to understand what that means. Through Christ, we're no longer under the law as a means of earning God's acceptance.

We're no longer condemned by the penalty of the law or enslaved by the power of sin as we fail to live up to the law. grace has set us free from all those things.

Yes. But grace hasn't made obedience irrelevant. God's commands still reveal his character and his will for his people.

And our obedience doesn't buy God's love. Our obedience grows out of God's love for us. And so the real question is this.

[12 : 19] If every Christian has this desire to obey and yet still battles with weakness, then how do we grow? How do we move from good intentions to faithful living as a follower of Jesus?

Well, Paul's answer in Romans 13 is simplicity itself. The key thing is love.

Love is the key to obedience. Love is the fulfilling of the law. Verses 9 to 10. The commandments you shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not covet, and whatever other commands there are, are summed up in this one command.

Love your neighbour as yourself. Love does no harm to a neighbour, therefore love is the fulfilment of the law.

Love is what makes obedience possible. one of the commentators I was looking at mentioned someone unnamed who said this, love everyone perfectly and you can do whatever you want.

[13 : 50] Love everyone perfectly and you can do whatever you want. And that sounds almost dangerous until we realise that a heart filled with Christ's love won't want to do anything that dishonours God or harms other people.

And that's exactly where Paul takes us in this passage. Charles Price, some of you may have heard of him, was a Bible teacher who was speaking at a conference I went to many years ago and he put it like this and I've never forgotten it and fortunately it's recorded in one of his commentaries that I'm just going to recite almost word for word.

The indwelling Holy Spirit transforms the Ten Commandments from external demands to internal promises.

Instead of an angry word telling you what you must not do the law becomes a prophetic guarantee of what Christ will accomplish in your life.

because Christ lives inside of us, the statement you shall not steal is no longer a rule we must obey, instead it becomes a promise from God.

[15 : 16] Because my spirit is at work within you, you'll find that you no longer have the desire or the need to steal and so you shall not steal.

will. The era of grace is not the abolition of the law but its supernatural fulfilment.

The law tells us what pleases God that grace gives us the living presence of Jesus in our lives enabling us to actually live it out.

And that I think is a helpful backdrop to this reading this morning that we're just going to briefly run through. Paul begins verse 8 with a wonderful kind of transition.

In the previous verses he's been talking about paying what we owe. Taxes belong to the government he says revenue belongs to those who collect it respect belongs to those in authority etc.

[16 : 21] Christians are to be people who settle their accounts. So he writes let no debt remain outstanding. Paul's concern is not about borrowing per se it's with unpaid debts promises made to repay but never kept.

But then he makes a remarkable turnaround and having told us not to leave debts outstanding unpaid he speaks of one debt that is never fully paid.

Let no debt remain outstanding he says except the continuing debt to love one another. Every other debt should eventually disappear this one never does.

you owe the debt of love today you give love today tomorrow you still owe love and so you give it again and then next week and next month and next year for the rest of your life.

love an early church father Origen I think that's how you pronounce it or origin I'm not sure said this the debt of love remains with us permanently we we pay we pay it every day and forever owe it Alexander the Great you've probably heard of the great commander was inspecting his troops one night and he came across a young soldier who was asleep while on guard duty that was a very

serious offence and the penalty was often death and Alexander the Great ordered this terrified soldier to stand up in front of him what's your name the emperor demanded and the young man looked at the ground and quietly replied it's Alexander sir and this great conqueror paused had he heard correctly he said boy what's your name it's

[18 : 35] Alexander sir and he stared him in the eyes he says what's your name he said it's Alexander sir and he said well soldier change your behaviour or change your name in Romans 13 Paul reminds us that Christians bear an even greater name we're called followers of Christ we belong to Jesus we carry his name and we'll be familiar with these words in John 13 words of Jesus a new command I give you love one another as I have loved you so you must love one another and by this everyone will know that you are my disciples if you love one another and a reminder

Paul isn't saying that we earn God's love by good behaviour rather that we belong to Christ and therefore our lives should increasingly reflect his character we love because he first loved us and our behaviour will tell people who we are we carry the name Christian and love is what they should see and now maybe you're sitting there thinking to yourselves again hang on Martin I'm not sure about this either that's okay but it's not that easy and you're right it's not that easy some people are very easy to love others require a bit more grace that's human nature but the answer is that God has never asked us to do this in our own strength

Romans chapter 5 verse 5 says this God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit so notice the source it's not our natural kindness or our natural personality it's God's own love that has been poured into our hearts so I just want to quickly suggest five very practical aspects of this love this love that we're called to show to others firstly this kind of love becomes a reality as we learn to live in it Paul prays in Ephesians 3 that believers would grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ and before we can reflect

Christ's love surely we need to understand just how much we are loved by him we need to grasp that to learn and to understand how much we're loved secondly then comes our willingness to surrender ourselves to the Holy Spirit left to ourselves perhaps I'm just speaking for myself but I know that selfishness and anger and bitterness and resentment come all too naturally but when we yield those things to the Holy Spirit he produces something that we can't produce in ourselves and as Paul writes in Galatians the fruit of the Spirit is love love is the work of the Holy Spirit in us before we then direct that towards others so learning to live in this love learning what it's about surrendering ourselves to the

Holy Spirit and then thirdly Paul says this love is something about being a deliberate choice and in Colossians he talks about putting on love in the same way that you put on a coat each morning we choose to forgive we choose to seek peace we choose to be patient to other people married couples who've spent decades together know that love is far more than a feeling it's a daily decision there was a married couple who were going through very difficult times and the lady came to her church pastor and said pastor I just need to tell you I'm afraid I think we're going to get a divorce we've just talked about what some of those practicalities are he says well is this you know have you reached the end of the road!

[23 : 41] I'm sorry I don't even like him let alone love him you know he resents everything I do we can't even talk without bickering he's never in the house if he gets a chance he'll go down the local bar it's just we've reached the end of the road and the pastor said well you know sometimes regrettably these things happen but before you go ahead with any paperwork will you do one!

come back in three months time but in the meantime I want you to go home and I want you to act as though you love him to the ends of the earth act as though he is the love of your life and then come back in three months time we'll talk about how you can make a divorce as pleasant as you can so anyway!

she came back three months later with her husband holding hands we've fallen in love again she said I did what you said and it wasn't easy but we love each other they chose love love is a choice fourthly Philippians chapter two Paul talks about not making ourselves the centre of attention but thinking about others before we're thinking about ourselves and love flourishes when we become more interested in how we can love other people and then finally from verse 11 in our passage from Romans today Peter adds another important dimension to this practical thing about love the day is coming he says because you see there's an urgency about love life is short opportunities don't last forever we can't afford to nurse grudges for years

Christians are to live with an awareness that Christ is coming again it's time to wake up throw off the darkness and put on the armour of light as the reading said we don't know what's around the corner so we love every day is another opportunity to live in a way that reflects the Lord we belong to to live up to the name Christian so I'm going to wrap up now with something practical how do we begin paying this lifelong debt what does that mean this afternoon or tomorrow three questions I don't want to show of hands this time have you quarreled or fallen out with someone if you have do something about it today this afternoon or tomorrow give them a ring write them a letter drop them an email maybe even go and knock on the door find a way to say sorry even if you don't think it's your fault maybe you've not quarreled with someone have you neglected a friend is there someone that you used to be really close with and you've kind of drifted away and now you don't bother trying to contact them why don't you call them or message them see how they are see that they're okay maybe that's not you do you need to say thank you more often than you do to the people that you love most deeply to your family your close friends if you do how about this afternoon or tomorrow find a way to say thank you but above all let's ask

God to help us love as Jesus loved us because when his love fills our hearts the debt of love isn't a burden that we carry it's a joyful privilege that we pay and we pay again and we pay again and we pay again and again let's pray father we do thank you for your word to us we thank you that it helps us living lives where we aspire to follow your guidelines your commandments your teaching your example Lord we want to be known as a people of love fill us again with your

[29:13] Holy Spirit that people might know that we are your disciples because of the way we love one another thank you Lord Amen