

Loving One Another

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 3rd of March 2002. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled Loving One Another and is based on Romans chapter 13 verse 8 to chapter 15 verse 13.

And you may like to have open the passage from Romans on page 923 in the Black Bibles in front of you, page 923, beginning at Romans 13 verse 8.

And I'll pray for us. Heavenly Father, we pray that you'll speak to us from your word, and write it on our hearts that we may do it, and glorify you and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen. In some ways, this long reading that Joan read for us is perhaps the most important part of Paul's letter to the Romans.

[1 : 10] For those who are visitors today, since last June, would you believe, I've been preaching through Paul's letter to the Romans with a few gaps here and there. But often it seems to me in the things that I've heard in sermon series that I've heard over the years, in commentaries even, that are written on Romans.

Romans 1 to 8 is seen as the heart of the letter, and the rest is sometimes forgotten or ignored, never preached on, or put aside, or relegated to a sort of second volume, or something like that. Too many preachers in sermon series on Romans stop at chapter 8. Now maybe after all these months on Romans, you sort of wish, well maybe it would have been good if we'd stopped at chapter 8 and had a break.

But actually the letter is driving towards the passage that was read for us today. The trouble with the other view is that all too often, Romans is explained as the book that tells us how to get right with God.

But in the end that's not quite right, it seems to me, for Paul's letter to the Romans. Because though it does tell us how to get right with God in the first chapters, the point of telling us how is why.

[2 : 27] And in the end the letter to the Romans is written to tell us why God enables us to get right with Him. And in the end that's the bigger issue. The key issue is not how to be saved, but why God saves us.

Why are we saved the way we are in Christ, and through the death and resurrection of Christ. Now for those with elephantine memories, you may remember the very first sermon on Romans last year, in June.

In the first verses of this letter, Paul tells us that he will be expounding the gospel of God concerning his son, and that the purpose of the gospel is to bring people to the obedience of faith for the sake of Jesus' name.

Chapter 1 verse 5. That is the purpose of the gospel is for the sake or glory of God of Jesus. That's why we're saved.

So that we may glorify God. To use an expression Paul uses in several places in this letter. And that's why Romans does not end at chapter 8, but continues through to where we are today and finishes in chapter 16.

[3 : 45] Paul began in chapter 1 by telling us that by and large people do not glorify God. That they've exchanged the glory of God for idols and for lies. And all people without exception fall short of the glory of God, he said in chapter 3.

But because of the work of Jesus Christ on the cross, dying for us and rising again from the dead and ascending to heaven, we can boast in the hope of sharing in the glory of God, despite the fact that we remain sinners.

Paul said that very clearly in chapter 5. And then in chapter 8 he made it clear that God who has predestined us and called us and brought us into a relationship with him will certainly one day bring us to glorification.

which is not only ourselves being brought to glory, but the final glorification of God as well. But how now do we glorify God?

If we fall short of his glory and we can boast in the hope of his glory, which is a certain hope of glorification, how now do we glorify God?

[4 : 59] And that's what these last chapters are about. And it is why the gospel is there and why the letter to the Romans is written. It is so that now in this life even, we may bring God glory.

We do that firstly by responding to the mercies or the gospel of God as chapter 12 began and told us, as we saw a few weeks ago. We do that through lives that are transformed by the renewing of our minds, according to the gospel.

Again, as we saw a few weeks ago. But running through chapters 12 to the end is a key component of glorifying God. And that is love.

We saw it a fortnight ago in the second half of chapter 12. And we see it as the thread that runs through all of this long reading that Joan read for us this morning. In our society, love is often, all too often, an indulgent pleasure.

We choose whom we love, we choose whom we don't love, and our way of love is stimulated by our desires for self-gratification, for pleasure and self-fulfillment. But the love that we see here commanded of the Christian is an obligation, not a choice.

[6 : 12] It's not an optional extra for the Christian life. We are under obligation to love, and we are not free to choose whom we love either. Our practice of love as Christians, unlike the world's practice of love, is not to be stimulated by self-pleasure, but rather it is defined and constrained by God's law.

Our practice of love as Christians is to glorify God. But more than that, our practice of love is grounded in the gospel that Paul has expounded in the early chapters of this letter.

You see, Paul is writing to the Romans here and saying to them, you have to love. It is an obligation. But he's not saying, come on, try to love each other a bit more and stop fighting.

That's what my mother used to say to me when I fought with my sisters when I was a child. She's given up saying that to me now. You see, what Paul is saying here to the Romans is not just try and love more, but he's saying that the gospel itself empowers and provides the basis and model for love.

In chapter 5, Paul said, God demonstrates or proves his love for us. And that was seen in Jesus dying for us, firstly, a sacrificial love.

[7 : 35] But secondly, that he died for us even though we were weak and helpless, sinners, indeed enemies of God. That's the nature of God's love for us.

And thirdly, chapter 5 told us that God has put into our hearts his Holy Spirit who pours into our hearts the love of God. So that the love of God is in a sense implanted within us when we respond with faith to the gospel of God concerning his Son.

That's the love that we are to practice. God's love. A love that is in a sense indiscriminate. That loves the loveless and the weak and the helpless. And we love in response to God's love for us and empowered by God's love implanted in us by his Spirit.

And this love is our obligation. It's not a free choice. We don't choose to love or choose whom to love. We're commanded, obliged by the gospel to love without discrimination.

That's how Paul begins this section. Verse 8 of chapter 13. Owe to no one anything. He doesn't mean don't have any debts. But it's basically to say the one debt that you will never be able to repay is to love one another.

[8 : 52] We owe that to each other because we owe it to God. Love is a debt that we will never be able to fully repay. It's not an option. We're obliged to love one another.

This is not a love that we define either. It's not what we say what love is. Some feeling here or some motivation here. Love is defined by the law of God.

So Paul goes on to say in verse 9 the commandments you shall not commit adultery you shall not murder you shall not steal you shall not covet and any other commandment for that matter are summed up in this word love your neighbour as yourself.

That's what it means to love. It's not for us to define it. God's defined it for us. And so we love by obeying the commandments of God. And we obey the commandments of God by loving. The two are mutually defining in a sense. So he says in verse 10 finishing that paragraph love does no wrong to a neighbour therefore love is the fulfilling of the law. We practice and obey God's law by practicing love and we practice love by obeying God's law.

[10:00] Love you can say is the heart and the soul of the commandments of God for us to keep. Now the next point is that there is an urgency for us to love.

This is not something to just delay ad infinitum to the end of our lives and say well I'll get it right someday. It's not that important. There is an urgency for us to love because the time is short. See our world is not like this. Our world just carries on as though time will just go on forever. All too often we can think that and we suddenly realise how time has flown.

The time is short. And that's what Paul says in the last paragraph of chapter 13. Besides this you know what time it is. How it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep.

For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers. The night is far gone. The day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light.

[11:04] That is we are to be ready for Jesus' return is what he's saying. And Jesus is coming soon. And the way to be ready is to be loving of one another. If we have not put on love when he returns then we've wasted our opportunity and we're ill prepared for his return.

Now the world in which we live Paul describes as a dark world. It's a world that's full of expressions about love. Every film almost. Every song. Every novel.

Almost every advertisement on TV has got some sort of association with love about it. But it's not Christian love. Usually. You see the world's love so often leads to or is expressed in reveling or drunkenness.

Or it's expressed in debauchery and licentiousness. Because people confuse sex with love. It's often in our world leading to quarrelling and jealousy.

How many plots of films and books and TV programs that are supposedly about love are really about the jealousy and quarrelling that so-called love provokes.

[12:13] That's the world's love. We're not to be conformed to that standard or to that love. But the love that we are to practice is the love of God. A love that does not issue in reveling and debauchery and licentiousness and drunkenness and quarrelling and jealousy.

But rather, Paul says at the very end of chapter 13 put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh to gratify its desires. Our love is to be Christ's love.

We're to be clothed in Him. The idea is of putting on clothes as though on the morning you open your wardrobe and you put on Jesus Christ. That our character is to be His character.

Our love is to be His love. Not the world's love but to be transformed from the world's love into the love of Christ. As Paul had said in chapter 12 we're to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. We could equally say we're to be transformed by putting on Jesus Christ. The problem that people have with teenagers today is not a new phenomenon.

[13:19] Teenagers have always been a problem. Even before I was a teenager. Hundreds of years ago there was a 16 year old boy who was addicted to sex.

He had a whole series of relationships later a wife, mistresses, lovers and so on. He abandoned the Christian faith of his mother much to her grief but it certainly stimulated her prayers for him.

At university he had several relationships with women. He tried pursuing philosophy to find meaning in life but found it in the end futile.

He turned to astrology the stars to try and find some sort of meaning and purpose in life again futile. One day as a grown man he was in the garden of his house and he heard a child's voice from over the fence saying take up and read.

Probably she was playing some sort of children's game but something in her words take up and read provoked a response in him. He went and found his New Testament given to him many years before by his mother.

[14:34] He opened it at random and the words that he read were the last words of Romans chapter 13. Let us live honorably as in the day not in reveling and drunkenness not in debauchery and licentiousness not in quarrelling and jealousy but instead put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh to gratify its desires.

Having read those words the man was brought to his knees in repentance his life was changed his mind was transformed by the gospel and he put on the Lord Jesus Christ. Later he became a bishop one of the greatest bishops of the church history and his name was Saint Augustine a bishop in North Africa.

The gospel transforms us from the love standards of our world to the love standards of God and Saint Augustine is just one example of that.

What follows is Paul now earthing this command to love in the particular situation of the church in Rome to whom he writes. It seems it was a church like so many churches ancient and modern that had at least two groups within them that brought about some sort of tension or disunity.

Paul calls these two groups here the weak and the strong. The weak group were probably mainly Jewish Christians though perhaps not exclusively so and for them apart from the fact that they'd become Christians they seem to cling very tightly to many of the Old Testament Jewish practices and rituals.

[16:14] For example it seems they would not eat any meat that was not cooked according to Jewish kosher cooking laws. They would strictly observe the Sabbath day commandments of the Old Testament and so on.

In contrast to them there were the strong probably mainly Gentile Christians though again not exclusively so because Paul calls himself a strong Christian and he of course was a Jewish Christian.

They exercised more liberty than the weak Christians. For them it was not an issue about whether you had to eat meat that was kosher or non-kosher. You could eat anything they would argue. And Sabbath days were not quite so important and so we could exercise some flexibility about the important days or the unimportant days. Notice how Paul describes them.

Verse 2 of chapter 14 some believe in eating anything while the weak eat only vegetables probably because you could not get kosher meat at that time in Rome.

[17:14] Verse 5 a bit further down some judge one day to be better than another while others judge all days to be alike. Probably referring to specific Sabbath days and Jewish festivals and so on.

Now notice too that neither group is heretical. Paul does not argue to say you weak Christians you've got it wrong. You've compromised the gospel. Not at all.

If they were heretical he would certainly come down hard on them and urge true Christians either to bring them to conversion or to avoid them as he does in Romans 16 about other people.

But here they are both holding to different opinions. He calls them opinions in verse 1. So they're secondary issues. That is they're not primary issues about the gospel about what makes somebody a Christian.

They're secondary issues that people hold with some conviction but opposing views. They're both Christians both groups but they're opinions that they express very clearly.

[18:19] Paul implies through this section that the strong have got it right. That Christians are not bound by kosher food laws or by Sabbath day observances and so on.

He implies that there is a real liberty that the gospel brings Christians but the issue here is not who's right. The issue here is how do these two groups relate to each other in love.

That's the issue. Because they're secondary matters in the end it doesn't matter whether you eat only kosher meat or not or observe a Sabbath day or not.

There may be technically a right opinion as Paul seems to imply but the more important issue is not who's right but how do they relate to each other in love. Now for most of us there's no exact parallel in our church on this.

That is we don't have a Jewish and non-Jewish divide at least here and in most churches in the West or in Australia I guess over these sorts of issues.

[19:23] However there are certainly issues that virtually every church faces where there are differing opinions that are keenly felt and firmly held on to about what should be done and should not be done within church fellowship and church practice.

In this situation that Paul addresses the weak are holding fast to the Old Testament as the basis of their practices. For us it may be that our differing opinions don't quite have such a biblical basis. however the sorts of issues that may be addressed by this issue of how do Christians with differing opinions relate could be things like Christians who think that it's okay to drink alcohol and those who

don't.

I guess in times past Christians who thought it was okay to dance and others who didn't or to smoke and not smoke. But other issues perhaps come into this general gamut of what's being addressed here as two different groups with differing opinions that are secondary issues.

The form of baptism that should be administered whether children ought to be baptised or not. It seems to me that is a secondary issue not a primary one about the gospel.

[20 : 37] It may be to do with issues of things like church music or styles of services liturgical issues or maybe even cultural issues between different cultures about how they express their Christian faith.

In the end those secondary matters are matters of opinion no matter how keenly felt and maybe no necessarily right or wrong opinion either but the key for us is to make sure that we relate to each other in love.

So Paul begins chapter 14 with the key command here. Welcome. Not the formal welcome where you stand outside the church and shake somebody's hand and say welcome.

But a welcome that embraces into fellowship and friendship within the Christian church. That is the welcome that Paul is urging here.

In particular he says in verse 3 the strong those who eat must not despise those who abstain. That is look down your nose upon them and say you've got it wrong you're just a weak Christian you you can eat all this go on and eat it.

[21 : 49] That sort of disdainful mocking sort of attitude that must not happen Paul says but likewise those who abstain the weak must not pass judgment on those who do eat.

Oh you strong Christians as you call yourself you've gone and broken God's law and you've eaten other things passing judgment on them. That should not happen either. Paul is saying in verse 3 and he goes on to say at least three verses that follow that judgment is God's prerogative.

It's not for us to pass judgment on such matters within church fellowship. Paul's first point here to both groups is that whatever group weak or strong whether they eat or don't eat whether they observe Sabbath days or not they are to do so for the Lord.

That is their motivation in eating or not eating in the different observances or non-observances they are to do so motivated by serving and loving the Lord. So he says in verse 6 those who observe the day observe it in honour of the Lord.

Those who eat eat in honour of the Lord. Those who abstain abstain in honour of the Lord. And he goes on to say in verses 7 to 11 whatever you do in fact do it for the Lord.

[23 : 04] Now that might be obvious but actually it's an important first step because so often in Christian circles when we know that there is a group that has a differing opinion from ourselves we begin to hold our own view more rigidly and more intransigently in order to provoke those who hold a different opinion.

Paul won't have anything of that. We must hold our convictions firm but for the Lord's sake not in order to provoke or to further divide the Christian fellowship.

Notice how then our behaviour must be clearly Godward in direction. It is in serving God that is the primary motivation here. There must be a sincere conviction for the opinions that we hold convinced that we are obeying and serving God to the best of our ability by holding them.

But notice too that our glorifying of God in what we do is not a private affair. That is we glorify God not only by holding firm our convictions and practising them but in the way we relate to others.

And that is the crunch issue in this section of Romans. And that is where Paul heads in the second half of chapter 14 from verse 13 onwards. This is where true love is really defined.

[24 : 28] The strong in particular are addressed here. Those who have a liberty to eat or not eat. And Paul says to them in effect you must be prepared to forego your rights for the sake of the weaker brethren.

And here in effect we can say there are three groups of Christians. The weak who think I shouldn't eat because it would be wrong. The strongest say yes of course I can eat I'm going to eat as much as I like.

I'm right. But the mature loving Christian who says I know that I can eat but for the sake of you weaker Christians I'll refrain.

And that's the issue from 14:13 onwards. Because when a strong Christian who may well have it right and understand the liberty of the gospel are right does things that somehow hinder the weaker

Christian we are treading into loveless and dangerous water.

Notice what he says about the strong who ignore the weak. He says in verse 13 let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another.

[25 : 40] So in Paul's situation a strong Christian who goes ahead and eats non-kosher food all the time in face of those weaker Christians is putting a stumbling block before them a hindrance.

Now that's not a light matter because Paul goes on to describe in verse 15 that this stumbling block or this hindrance will injure your brother or sister. You injure them by what you eat or grieve them. And then at the end of verse 15 he says do not let what you eat cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died. That is if you strong just flaunt your liberty without love then weaker Christians may actually be brought to ruin.

Their faith may crumble in the face of your flagrant practice of your liberty. The loving thing is not to exploit your liberty to eat or not eat.

The loving thing is to refrain from what indeed is right for the sake of another. Too often in churches the weak and for that matter the strong hold their positions so intransigently that they actually don't love each other at all.

[26 : 54] It's my right. I can do that. Done it for years. It's the right thing to do. Or I can do that. It's new but other churches do it. We can do that. Very unloving.

Very ungenerous attitudes. And churches all around the world suffer for that sort of disunity and lack of love. That behavior is loveless.

Paul says in verse 15 if your brother or sister is being injured by what you eat you are no longer walking in love. And then he gives the correction.

The second half of verse 15 do not let what you eat cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died. You see there is the love of Christ as the motivation for our love.

We cannot afford in any sense to bring damage or danger to a weaker Christian by what we do. Christ's love was expressed for that person by dying for them.

[27 : 51] What a smaller thing it is then for us to yield up our own rights for the sake of one for whom Christ died. Christ died for us even the weak and the helpless the sinner and his enemy.

Paul said in Romans 5 clothed in Christ as he said in chapter 13 at the end we must practice his love. And now Paul keeps Christ as the example as he moves into chapter 15.

We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak and not please ourselves. Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor. And then the example of Christ again for Christ did not please himself but as it's written the insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.

He quotes from a psalm. He's referring to Jesus death. One of the great stumbling blocks for non-Christians in our world is Christian disunity.

In Paul's day it was the disunity between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. In our day it's denominationalism, congregationalism and individualism. The separation of Christian church into little groups and bodies and so on.

[29 : 04] All with keenly expressed and held convictions but all too often lacking love for one another. Now there are plenty of movements in our world and in our Christian world that are seeking to promote unity among churches and Christians.

They are good. Good things to pursue. However unity is not the ultimate goal. The ultimate goal is glorifying God. And that's where Paul brings this argument to a conclusion.

You see the gospel of God brings people together. It unifies people of all races. Jews and Gentiles and all other races and backgrounds for that matter as well.

The gospel brings Jew and Gentile together on an equal footing as sinners before the judgment throne of God. Jewish privilege does not save and Gentile ignorance is no excuse.

Paul argued that clearly in chapters 1 to 3. But likewise Jew and Gentile are brought together on an equal footing of salvation by Christ. Faith alone is the means of salvation.

[30 : 08] Christ alone is its basis. Paul argued that clearly in chapters 4 and 5. And then in 6 to 11 he argued also clearly the gospel brings people of all races equally to God.

That's the extraordinary character of the love of God. So any loveless behavior of Christian people which is divisive and brings disunity also brings discredit to the gospel of God.

It brings God's glory into disrepute. Where Christians who even hold right opinions firmly and practice them are living without love for others of other opinions God is not glorified. Rather such behavior conforms to our world's patterns. Only loving, selfless loving, indiscriminatory loving will bring unity not for its own sake but for the glory of God.

And that's the model of Christ. It's the grounds of the gospel. And our welcome of others is to be based on and motivated by Christ's welcome for us.

[31 : 17] So Paul says in chapter 15 verse 7 Welcome one another therefore just as Christ has welcomed you for the glory of God. Not for the sake of unity per se.

But for the sake of the glory of God. That was God's purpose from the beginning. Those next verses 8 through to 12 in chapter 15 give the Old Testament basis that that's what God was on about. Bringing Jew and Gentile together from the beginning to sing the praises of God united with one voice. That glorifies God. And in order for that to happen there must be real and selfless and sacrificial love between Christians of differing opinions.

It is not in our own strength that we can do that either. So the end of this section 15 verse 13 is a prayer that acknowledges that it's God's power by his spirit that enables us to love and have unity. May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit not by your own power to love but empowered and transformed by the Holy Spirit of God.

[32 : 28] Let's pray. May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another in accordance with Christ Jesus so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen. Amen. Amen.