

Well folks I want to begin with a word of thanksgiving that we are a church that loves God's word, that we are blessed by sitting under and obeying God's word, and that we are a church that is guided by God's word. There is no better place to be, than to shaped as people by what God says to us and not what other worldly wisdom would try to make us think. So this is good, and today we continue with the book of Romans.

I always know that I am coming to the end of a series when I start thinking about the next series of teaching in September, and the other day I joked with someone that maybe in September we will study the book of Philemon or Jude (for those that don't get the joke, the books of Jude and Philemon are only 1 chapter in length). But we have been blessed I believe as we have worked our way through this colossal writing of Paul to the Romans. And the best way to think of the structure of Romans is the image of a bridge. On one side of the bridge are chapters 1-11 which is all about what God has done for us through Jesus – how we can have a relationship with him – it's that vertical relationship between God and humanity. And now in chapters 12-16 we can see how this relationship with God affects our daily lives in the relationships with others (that horizontal relationship). And specifically in chapters 12&13 we have seen the different attitudes that Jesus's followers should have towards others. We have thought about our attitude to one another within the church, then we think about how we should love those outside the church, and then last week we considered the attitude we should have towards the Government.

So this week, Paul kind of summarises these relationships. So let's in good old presbyterian fashion, break these verses down today with 3 main thoughts:

So as a result of changed lives, the first thing that this does or should do is that we **LOVE OTHERS**. Now that might seem obvious. And in fact, people who don't have any spiritual faith to follow will admit that love is, as the Beatles say, all you need. Our world today needs love. But how we love others, or what that looks like needs to be defined. So, Paul defines it by what's it's not - Paul is saying about these commandments that he lists in verse 9 – don't commit adultery, don't murder, don't steal, and don't covet. Love means we don't hurt each other. And Paul says they can all be summed up in the one command "Love your neighbour as yourself". We've read that in the Old Testament, Jesus quotes it, and now Paul takes it up here.

So let's be clear about this - you can't love God by simply saying you go to Church or by paying into the church each week. Loving God is about surrender to him – but it's also about caring for those around you. Loving God means loving others – full stop. Paul is assuming from the first 11 chapters that we understand our relationship with God, and out of the overflow of this it affects the relationships with others.

But here's the issue, loving others is not just not hurting them, it's more than just showing occasional kindness, but we learn to love others first by understanding the love of God for us. If we don't understand what true love is from God, then we have no way of understanding what kind of love we are meant to show to others. Love is to see others and treat others the way that God sees them. And if you think that God loves others in a different way to how he loves you, then that will affect how you express your love to them. You know, we are so blessed with the Gospels because it gives us a ring side seat to the way that Jesus comes face to face with people who are hurting and are hopeless. And so we see Jesus' deep compassion for people. He recognises their worth and value, he sees them as the people that he has created. Jesus reaches out and touches people who we might

consider as unsafe. He spends time with political enemies and prostitutes. So, let's pause for a moment and think. Consider how you see others – do you see them in the way that Jesus sees them? Or how about this, who are you not naturally inclined to show kindness to? Who do you not naturally want to see success in? Whether you agree with a person's lifestyle or decisions or whatever they might have done to you, we are called to recognise every person's value and worth. But do we see them that way? Paul is saying here in verse 8 that the only debt that you should never clear is the debt to love one another. It should always be on you.

And here's the reality - it's impossible at times to fully love others, but it becomes much easier when we recognise the depth of love which God has shown for us (who are messed up). When we understand that, it pours itself out even on those who we might consider as enemies or those we disagree with. Jesus says this in John 13 as an important signpost of our witness as a church and also as individuals, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another".

Where today do you need to show love? Where today do you need to examine your lack of love?

So let's move on to the next thing that Paul says in verses 11&12. *"The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. ¹²The 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"*.

So the next thing that comes from love is to **LIVE WITH URGENCY**.

Paul here is calling for action. He's speaking to a new group of believers in the 1st century, and he's calling for urgency because salvation is nearer, he says. Now I don't know about you, but we are sitting 2,000 years after these words were said. Paul was calling for urgency because of the second coming of Christ, so was he wrong to say this if we are still here? So why hasn't Jesus returned? Well, I think the answer is that God is incredibly patient with us. We exist today because God has waited. We get to be sons and daughters of God because he has been patient with us. We await the day when Jesus will come, and so what does this mean for us? It means we should be ready. We should live with urgency. Paul says that the night is nearly over; the day is almost here. Paul wants us to make sure that we are prepared. And he says, "to put on the armour of light". And obviously when do people wear armour? Well, it's when going to war. And that folks is what we are in. We are in a battle for lost souls. Right around our town and villages here we have people who don't realise it but they are losing a battle for their very life – you and I have people in our families who are losing a battle for their very lives. And Paul is saying to get up from our sleep, and to take up the armour of God against the schemes of satan who is very happy in separating our families and communities from each other when it comes to eternity. This is a call for action to today's Church.

So, let's reflect for a minute. Would you describe your life as urgent, or would you lean more towards comfort. Do you feel an urgency about the lives of men and women in your family, for sons and daughters, grandchildren, who have an eternal destination according to scripture, and without Christ they have no hope. Because if we love our neighbours, then surely, we want to introduce them to Jesus? So how do we live with more urgency? Well like any revival throughout history it starts with prayer. And I don't think I can do anything more within this church family to facilitate corporate prayer – by that I mean gatherings of

prayer. I think it all begins with asking God to move. And so the challenge is this – will you pray that God will work through us, to make us more urgent to be agents of the Good News of the Gospel? Folks I've been in churches over the years and in more recent times where there are no Sunday Schools, or church numbers are reducing, or where there's no prayer gatherings. That's evidence of the lack of urgency. We can't blame it on societal change, because in many respects that's inevitable. But we can blame ourselves for not having the urgency to do something.

So, let's love others, and because we love others then we live with urgency. Now let's look at the final verses. And through it we are called to **PURSUE A GOOD LIFE.**

Verses 12-14 *“So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armour of light. ¹³ Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. ¹⁴ Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh”*

Our original church in Ballyeaston, St Augustine's was a settlement and place of worship going back to the 5th century when Augustinian monks would have settled there as a place of mission. You probably know that St Augustine was a renowned Theologian. Anyway, he wrote a number of important works, namely his Confessions, and The City of God. In his Confessions he felt this deep turmoil or distance from God. He records how he was weeping under a tree, and he felt this deep sense of his sinfulness against God and his need for forgiveness. As he's in this place of grief, he hears a nearby chanting and a call from God to open the scriptures, and so he happens to have a copy of Paul's Letter to the Romans with him, and he opens up at verse 13 of this chapter of Romans – *‘Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy’*. Here is what he said after reading this verse, “No further did I desire to read, nor was there need. For instantly at the end of this sentence, by a light as it were of serenity infused into my heart, all the darkness of doubt vanished away”¹.

So why has this caused such an impact on Augustine? Well there's a contrast between darkness and light. He recognised in this verse his need to address the darkness in his heart. In the secrecy of darkness, or in that hidden place, these weaknesses of the flesh have the opportunity to grow and breed. All of these and other sins grow under the cover of darkness, and they grow shame so that we can't seem to escape from them. If you think about the beginning of the bible, with Adam and Eve, they sin against God, and the first thing they do is they hide. That's exactly what we do because sin prefers secrecy.

But folks here's the good news - Paul says that for Christians we are to live above that – we are to live in the daytime where appropriate living takes place. Because of what Jesus has done on the cross, the Gospel says that we don't need to hide any longer. The light of the Gospel says we have victory over shame and sin, because Jesus had victory over the cross and the grave, so we can live out of this new identity that Jesus wants to give us. Paul says in verse 14 that we are to clothe ourselves in the Lord Jesus Christ.

So what does clothing ourselves in Christ mean? It means we put Christ first, and we walk away from those sinful things that tarnish us. I was listening this week to Russell Brand, he is an comedian and actor who has led a rather hedonistic lifestyle and is currently being

¹ Augustine of Hippo – Confessions. Chapter 12

investigated for a number of sexual offense claims. In this past week he has claimed to have surrendered his life to the Lord Jesus and He was baptised in the River Thames. And whilst there will be plenty of scepticism about his sudden turn to God especially as he is investigated by the police, one of the things that he said on his YouTube channel this week was that after years of searching for pleasure and self-gratification, he has realised that meaning has deteriorated and the world offers nothing.

Whatever you make of Russell Brand, it does remind us that the Gospel message tells us is that we need to turn away, repent, from the things that would so easily destroy us – to “*put off (as Ephesians tells us) your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires*”. We actually don’t lose anything by walking away from the attractions of the world, we actually gain life. Jesus brings life. He is life. He is life to the fullest. So we wage war against our natural desires because if the Bible is true and Christ is the saviour, then our greatest flourishing, our greatest happiness, our greatest joy, our greatest purpose is not found inside ourselves with our own plans, but is found outside of ourselves in following Jesus – to surrender ourselves to him. And that’s why we should pursue a **good life** that only can be found in Jesus.

If you’re thinking you haven’t the strength to fight the flesh, then please remember that we have the Holy Spirit that empowers us to walk in the light. So, putting on Jesus means that we love others as God loves others, that we live urgently in light of his coming thinking about those around us who need to know that hope we have, and we pursue the good life in the new identity he has given us.

Maybe today, this relationship that I’m talking about is foreign to you, you don’t feel that love that I’m talking about. I invite you to put your trust in Jesus. Speak with me in this week ahead so that I can share with you about the relationship that is open to everyone.