

GOOD NEWS FOR ALL OF US

WEEK SIX: Romans 13:8-14

Romans Good News for All of Us: A Brief Introduction

Paul's epistle to the Romans is the most influential of his letters and has had an enormous impact on Christian theology and doctrine. Part of the reason is that it is the most systematic of Paul's letters; outlining as clearly as in any of his writings his understanding of the good news about Jesus. One consequence has been that Romans has been treated like a systematic theology rather than as an occasional document; one written to address a specific pastoral occasion. Romans, like all of Paul's letters, has a concrete situation that he is wanting to address. Scholars agree that there is evidence of division in the Roman church. The upshot of this is that the doctrine which dominates the first two-thirds of the letter is less an overview of Paul's thought and more of a foundation for the exhortations in the final chapters. In order to better understand the doctrine, we will benefit from better understanding the pastoral issues that Paul is hoping to address. To that end, we will be working through Romans backwards; seeking clarity about the concerns Paul has and then exploring the doctrinal foundations.

I have included an outline of the series and a brief bibliography at the end of this document.

Sermon Outline:

A Brief Overview of This Week's Sermon

Key Text(s): As we turn to Romans 13:8-14 let us take a moment to remember where we've been in this series so far. We are working our way backwards through the epistle on the premise that Paul is doing local, pastoral theology – addressing a situation in the Roman church – throughout the letter. The better we understand the situation he is addressing the better equipped we will be to navigate the doctrinally rich opening chapters. And what we have seen is that Paul is addressing a community that is beginning to fracture along the Jew/Gentile faultline. One of the situations this faultline was most evident was table fellowship. Both by length (14:1-15:113) and placement (the final block of teaching) we get the sense that this is the thing that Paul has wanted to address. Our text today is the deep breath before he does so.

Paul continues the thought in 13:7 (the NIV/UK heading unhelpfully breaks up the thought) of paying our debts, whether taxes, revenue, respect, or honour by reference to a debt we may leave outstanding. However, this text (vv. 8-14) is also connected to the theme of the whole section as outline in 12:1-2. This is demonstrated by the thematic parallels that are found in 1:18-32 where Paul speaks at length about the human predicament: futile thinking and a depraved mind that leads to improper worship and indecent actions – beginning with sexual immorality. Paul has called the Romans to offer themselves as living sacrifices as a proper form of worship and to renew their minds (12:1-12) and here reminds them of the behaviour that is to be avoided – beginning with four of the ten commandments (more on that in a moment) and including a list of pagan vices. The implication, if this reading is plausible, is that Paul has been thinking about the issue in chapter 14 from the very beginning of the letter!

Returning to verse 8, we have to ask, “To whom is the debt of love to be paid?” In context, it appears that the debt is one of gratitude to God. This whole section opened with, “in view of God’s mercy” and the action of God in Christ is always a central motivation for ethics which is Paul’s focus here.

And it is very much his focus. The list of commands he includes are all from the second tablet of the law that deal with our relationships with other and he cites the Jesus tradition that the law is fulfilled in our love of neighbour. In both instances, Paul leaves out an important focus – the love of God (see Mark 12:28-34). This omission makes sense when we remember Paul’s community focus, but is made easier to understand if we see the debt as one to God – we demonstrate our gratitude to God for his mercy by completing the Law and loving others.

And the Law and love must go together – we cannot substitute love for the Law. This relates to the purpose of the Law. Given after the rescue of Israel from Egypt, which was itself based on God’s promises to Abraham, which was a response to the frustration of his creation purposes by human folly and sin, the Law represents the conditions in which their relationship could flourish. Like a contract between a builder and homeowner the Law outlined what each party was to do for the relationship to work well.

And a flourishing relationship with God was to have a global impact. Like those we watch – older siblings or cousins, colleagues at work, parents who have children a bit older than ours – to learn how to navigate our own lives, the people of Israel, as they loved God, were to demonstrate how others might also join them in a flourishing relationship. This is the completion and fulfillment of the Law; love of God and love of others.

To the motivator of gratitude Paul then adds another beginning in v. 11. “And do this [all that he has just spoken about], understanding the present time.” This introduces an eschatological perspective. Eschatology is the study of the end times, but for Paul and the early Christian movement it was less about the return of Jesus (thought it was that too) and more about the present time. As far as Paul was concerned, when Jesus appeared it started the end-times countdown – which is why he can say our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.

We demonstrate our understanding of the times by our actions – if a deadline is approaching, wisdom is shown by doing what needs to be done to complete what needs to be completed – and Paul seems to be gently saying to the Romans that they need to show him that they understand the times.

This has to do with the opening admonitions in 12:1-2, especially not being conformed to the pattern of this age. If our future in Christ is approaching, the current age is becoming less relevant to us. It is like giving two-weeks notice at work. From the moment you submit that the job begins to become less and less relevant to you (and you to it!) because it is no longer your future. You still have to show up until the new job starts, but you are no longer being conformed to the pattern of that job! When we placed our faith in Jesus we submitted our notice to this age; it is no longer our future.

That doesn’t mean it is easy. For Paul, this age is a period of struggle – we are to put on the armour of light (see 8:18; 16:20). In a struggle we focus on what is most important. Paul wants the Romans to demonstrate their gratitude to God in love for others and to demonstrate their understanding of the times by doing so with a sense of urgency.

These are the words that Phoebe read just before she turns to the elephant in the room – the judgment, contempt, and lack of love evident in their attitudes and practices to food. Paul wants them to act quickly, decisively, and urgently to love each other.

We too are to act with urgency to address matters in our community of faith. If there are people we have been judging or those we have been holding in contempt or those who we need to forgive, we are to demonstrate our gratitude to God and our understanding of the times and begin now to do something about it!

NOTE: This is the last set of Life Group resources for Term 1. We’ll pick up our next series – Eastertide: The Resurrection Life – in late April. We’ll be returning to Romans 9-11 later in the term.

Questions to Ask

1. Paul talks about a “debt of love” in Romans 13:8. What do you think it means to owe love to others, and how is this different from other kinds of obligations?

2. The sermon suggests that our love for others is a response of gratitude to God. How does seeing love as “repayment” to God shape the way you treat people in your daily life?
3. Paul connects love with the Law rather than replacing it. Why do you think it’s important that love and obedience to God’s commands go together instead of being separated?
4. In verses 11–12, Paul emphasizes understanding “the present time” and living with urgency. What might it look like for you personally to live with that kind of spiritual urgency right now?
5. The sermon uses the image of giving “two weeks’ notice” to this age. What are some practical ways we can live as people whose future is no longer tied to the patterns of this world?
6. The sermon ends with a call to act quickly in areas like judgment, contempt, and forgiveness. Is there a relationship or situation in your life where you sense a need to act now? What would a first step look like?

A Prayer to Pray

Continue to pray for the unity of our community of faith. Pray that we would be a demonstration of the power of God to save everyone who believes and to unite them together in one family. Pray that we might rely on that power as we work out our salvation together.

A Practice to Try

Choose one of the first steps you identified in Q. 6 above and implement it this week.

Readings to Read This Week

The following texts pick up the themes of this sermon: love, law, gratitude, unity, and urgency.

1. Matthew 22:34-40
2. Galatians 5:13-26
3. James 2:1-11
4. 1 John 4:7-12
5. Ephesians 5:8-20

A Mission Commitment to Reflect on

One of our values is to be Others-Focused. The unity of the body of Christ is a mission-critical matter. Putting others first, serving them, and seeking to demonstrate our love for one another are all things we can do to strengthen our unity.

A GBC Initiative to Promote/Celebrate

Each week we will provide you with a key aspect of our community news that we would encourage you to remind your Life Group about.

1. Please remind your Life Group about the Easter services:
 - Tenebrae (7:30 pm – A service of shadows focused around a series of readings from the gospels about the events leading to Jesus’ death).
 - Good Friday (9:30 am)
 - Easter Sunday (9:30 am and 6:00 pm)

Good News For All of Us – Sermon Series outline

Please note that this is subject to change, but as it stands right now...

Term 1 (Romans 12-16)		Term 2 (Romans 9-11)		Term 3 (Romans 1-4)		Term 4 (Romans 5-8)	
15/2	Romans 16	7/6	9:1-29	23/8	TBD	25/10	TBD
22/2	15:14-33	14/6	9:30-10:21	30/8	TBD	1/11	TBD
1/3	14:1-15:13	21/6	11:1-24	6/9	TBD	8/11	TBD

8/3	12:14-13:7	28/6	11:25-36	13/9	TBD	15/11	TBD
15/3	Baptism			20/9	TBD	22/11	TBD
22/3	12:1-13					29/11	TBD
29/3	13:8-14						
5/4	Easter						

A Brief Bibliography

The following commentaries have been utilised in the preparation and delivery of this series.

Bird, Michael, 2016, *Romans*, Story of God Bible Commentary, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Gorman, Michael J., 2022, *Romans: A theological and pastoral commentary*, Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, Michigan.

McKnight, Scot, 2019, *Reading Romans Backwards: A Gospel of Peace in the Midst of Empire*, Baylor University Press, Waco, Texas.

Witherington, Ben III, 2004, *Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan.