

SERMON FOR 10TH JUNE - ROMANS 13 verses 8 - 14

Please turn to our passage for today which is Romans 13 verses 8 - 14 - and while you look that up a painting should appear on the wall.

Who painted this? What is it called?

If you get this then you get the Missions equivalent of the Turner prize - which is a bar of chocolate.

It is painted by someone called Hieronymus Bosch - a Dutch artist from the late 15th Century. His work is known for its fantastic imagery to illustrate moral and religious concepts and narratives. This is a great example - it is the middle section of a triptych - three paintings on three joined up panels - that is called "The Haywain" which now hangs in Madrid (not to be confused with the picture of the same name by John Constable - very different!).

The left hand panel depicts the Creation and fall of humanity and the right hand panel portrays the final punishment of the wicked.

The central panel - which you are looking at now - portrays the progress of a massive cart, piled high with hay, which is moving towards the final judgement. The cart is followed by the rich and powerful - the Pope and the emperor are amongst them - and surrounding the cart - and underneath it - are the lower classes - the peasants, nuns - and the clergy. They are all trying to fill their pockets with handfuls of hay.

The Haywain is being pulled by a pack of demons towards the final judgement while a heavenly Christ looks on - and what is striking is that He is ignored and unseen.

What is this all depicting?

The metaphor of a Hay cart was common and well known in 15th Century Holland - what Bosh was attempting in this picture is the idea that God had piled the world high with good things for humanity to enjoy. But men - in their selfishness and greed - wanted to keep these good things just for themselves.

In the painting - the focus is not on the one who provides - but rather on the things themselves. But these things - though not wrong in themselves - were as passing and worthless as hay!

It is a very striking painting - but what has it to do with our passage this morning?

Throughout the whole book of Romans the Apostle Paul has been urging the Roman Christians to - just as Jesus taught - live our lives in the present with our focus on the future - and weigh up all we do in the light of what that future holds.

But that is not our natural mind set - our natural inclination is to grasp hay. By that, as Paul explains in the opening Chapter of Romans, I mean to worship created things rather than

the One who created them and to live a life ignoring our eternal destiny - which leaves us facing the coming judgement of God unprotected.

But Paul tells us that if we have faith in the death of Jesus Christ on our behalf then we will be delivered from this judgement - we will no longer be under condemnation - and we will be set free to worship God in Spirit and in truth - which - as we learned from Romans 12 - involves all things and should impact every area of our lives.

Romans Chapter 12 - 15 addresses the question "What does it look like for the Christian to worship the Living God - how do we practically practice holiness".

Last week it was about how we work out our worship in relation to the ruling authorities. In the first 7 verses Paul talks about why the governing authorities are there and how we should respond to the law that is laid down by those in power.

We then get to verses 8- 10 - and it is still about the law.

But this time it is not about the law of the land, but rather the Law of God that we find in the first five books of the Bible - where the focal point is the 10 commandments found in both Exodus and Deuteronomy.

What is the relationship between this Law and Love?

This is what Paul explores now. In looking at the second half of Romans 13 we are going to look at it in two sections using the headings that are there in front of you.

The first is "Love Fulfils the Law" (verses 8 - 10) with the second being "The Day is near" (verses 11 - 14)

READ VERSE 8 - 10 - Love fulfils the Law.

So, what is the relationship between the Law and Love?

The answer is a very close and intimate one.

Not only does Paul make this clear but so too did the Lord Jesus.

Let me read you Mark Chapter 12 verses 28 - 31. (Read it)

Jesus to answer the question as to which is the most important commandment quotes from two parts of the Old Testament - the first being Deuteronomy 6 and the second - "Love your neighbour as yourself" is from Leviticus 19 verse 18.

Jesus, quoting directly from the Scriptures, sums up the whole law in two commandments - and he says that if you keep these two - then you keep them all!

This makes Christianity very simple - which is not to say it is easy!

Let's get this clear - God spoke through the Law in the Old Testament and said that Love is the greatest commandment.

Then Jesus said it, and then Paul said it.

There is thus a very clear consistency all the way through Scripture.

In the Old Testament – in the days of the law before the revelation of Love, Grace and Truth in the person of Jesus Christ – God’s law itself was saying:
“The heart of me (the law) is that you Love - you love God with all your heart and you love your neighbour as yourself”

Let us think about what Paul declares in verse 8 (Read it again)

I am sure we all like to pay any financial debt we may have – it is a pressure to owe money and when it is paid off a burden is lifted.

But Paul points to a debt here that can not be paid off – and he is not talking about a financial one.

He is talking about the continuing debt to love one another.

What does he mean?

It doesn’t mean that Love somehow cancels the law.

It doesn’t mean that if we love God and our neighbour it means we can ignore Gods Law – no!

To underline this Paul goes on to highlight the commandments in verse 9 and effectively he is saying this:

If you love someone – you will not murder them

If you love someone – you will not sleep with their spouse

If you love someone – you will not steal from them

If you love someone – you will not tell lies about them or lie to them.

If you love someone – you will actually be delighted that this man has plenty to live upon, that this woman dresses beautifully, this family lives in a lovely house.

In other words you will not covet and criticise and constantly cut them down because – rather than envying what they have – you are glad for what they have. That is all in the law and is also an expression of love.

Love one another is the abiding principle in the Christian life – and it covers all – including the law. Of course, we live under grace not the law – but if we love both God and others we will keep the law – why?

It is because Love is the fulfilment of the law.

Now, let me try and be clear here less I confuse you!

The Law of God cannot save us – only Christ can save us.

The Law of God cannot make us holy – that is the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

But what Paul is affirming here is that the Law shapes what it means to live a life of love.

To keep the Law shows our love for God – but because we cannot keep the Law perfectly – our debt to love is outstanding.

It is continuing – we never reach the point where we can say:

“I have done enough loving now – that’s it all paid off – I don’t have to do this sacrificial stuff anymore – I can just live for self now...”

Love is the fulfilment of the Law – the two actually go together and compliment each other – and we need a right balance of Love and the Law in our lives.

At one end of the scale – if we think pleasing God is all about keeping the law we can easily become proud, legalistic and judgemental – puffing ourselves up and looking down on others – and becoming hard and unloving.

But we need to be aware it can be just as spiritually dangerous at the other end of the spectrum – where we think that when it comes to Love the law doesn't matter at all.

The attitude that says:

“You do what you want to do – I won't judge or interfere – that would be unloving. I will do what I feel is right – please don't judge me – that would be unloving. Live like this and then the world will be a wonderful place – as we all love each other”

This way of thinking can soon become just self centeredness.

The truth is that we need to be told how we are to live our lives.

True love toward others must involve the rules and boundaries that the God, who created us, has given us.

Let me take you back to 1967 – I realise some of you were a long way from even being thought about – but those who were around will know it was when hippies and flower power was at it's height.

It was also when The Beatles – you have heard of them haven't you – were at their creative peak – and their songs profoundly influenced a whole generation. Their huge hit single in 1967 – released on 7th July 1967 – was what? (All you need is Love)

It was first heard for a live television broadcast called “Our World” when 24 countries were linked for the first time by a new global satellite. The message of this song became literally global!

The song became a mantra for the late 1960's:

“It's easy – “All you need is Love”. The song was written and sung by John Lennon – I think as he performed it he believed it – and thought he was living it.

Don't worry about moral restriction and rules – forget the oppression of religion – “all you need is love.”

Fast forward more than 40 years and John Lennon's first wife Cynthia gives an interview to a magazine. In the interview she recounted the pain and trauma when she discovered her time as John Lennon's wife was up when she came home one day to discover Yoko Ono in her dressing gown. I imagine John Lennon would have said that is the way of Love – following his desires and passions without restraint. But was that Loving to his wife and son?

Was it not rather dreadfully painful and destructive?

Love, in the Scriptures, never comes down to what I think is right.

We need God's Law to give us understanding as to how we actually, in reality, Love both God and our neighbour.

The Law shapes love's response, and it gives it content.

Love does no harm to its neighbour - therefore Love is the fulfilment of the Law.

Second section - "The Day is near"

Read verses 11 - 14.

One thing I love about Scripture - it is totally realistic about us human beings and human nature. Paul certainly was! He knew the attraction of the darkness - when everything is hidden - and the power of what he calls the deeds of darkness.

He knew it was easy to get distracted and diverted from the road we should be walking - he knew it is possible, spiritually speaking, to be in a state of slumber.

He knew how easy it was to be focussed on gratifying our sinful nature - and to be tempted to stuff our pockets with hay (in reference again to Hieronymus Bosch).

Paul knows this - which is why at the end of the chapter he tells us to wake up!

Why?

Paul recognised that the present age is rumbling on - and most people are ordering their lives in accordance with its style and habits.

But we should recognise that the new world is breaking in - in fact since the resurrection of Jesus Christ it has broken in. God's new age has begun - and that great day is approaching when it will come to fulfilment.

Those who believe in, follow and proclaim Jesus as Lord are commanded to live in the present according to the values of the world that is to come.

Paul urges us to keep in our minds and hearts that the night is almost over and the day is almost here.

What is this day he is referring to?

It is the day when the Lord Jesus Christ will return to judge the living and the dead, when we will finally see our salvation come to its fullness in the New Creation.

All the way through Scripture - in both the Old and New Testament we are told to remember the day of the Lord. We need reminding because it remains a general failing of us fallen and flawed human beings to forget these things - to put them out of our minds - and fail to allow them to touch our lives in the present as they should.

Our response to the certainty that this day is coming should be to live holy and Godly lives and to let our perspective and values be moulded by looking forward in hope and anticipation to that day.

It won't have escaped your attention that this year is the 100th anniversary of the maiden - and final - voyage of the most famous ship of all time - The Titanic.

I came across a striking story concerning The Titanic. As the ship was going down and passengers were trying to get into the lifeboats, one very wealthy lady rushed back to her grand cabin, ignored all her gold and jewellery worth thousands of pounds, and instead picked up as much fruit as she could from the bowl on the table. Why?

Because where she was going, in a lifeboat adrift at sea, diamond necklaces were worth nothing – but apples and oranges would be priceless.

What a change of values a day can make.

Paul is urging us to wake up – the night is nearly over – the day is almost here – so decide and determine to live in light of that day now.

But it is not just about stopping and doing certain things.

Yes, we are to put aside the deeds of darkness – but what else are we to do?

You would expect him to say “put on the works of light”.

He doesn't say that – instead what does he say?

Verse 14 - “Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ”.

This is moving beyond just doing good works and living a moral life – the most important thing is that we are united spiritually with Christ and that we allow Him, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to transform how we think and live.

Ever since the resurrection of Jesus the night is drawing to a close and the sun is rising – so it is time to wake up.

How should looking forward to that day affect us in practice?

Let's pick just one of those things in the list in verse 13 – the very last one – jealousy.

Is that not common, to some degree, to us all?

Notice how dissention – which is quarrelling and falling out - and jealousy are closely connected. One does tend to lead to the other.

We see what someone else has got – and we want it.

We resent and begin to dislike the person - because they have it and we do not.

Jealousy leads to anger and bitterness- leads to criticism and dissention and division through our attitudes, words and actions.

Let's consider something that is a potentially a source of Jealousy among us.

Housing - the property we live in.

Perhaps you would love to own your own property - but can't afford it.

Perhaps you do own a property – but, even then, you wish it was bigger and in a nicer location.

You learn that someone you know has bought a property – it is one you would love to own and live in – it stirs you deeply and not in not a nice way.

What should my reaction be?

Paul would say those in Christ - put off jealousy – don't make the whole property issue a focus that will just leave you jealous and resentful.

Why?

Because the day is coming – indeed it is near – when what you are getting all annoyed about in the present will mean nothing and count for nothing.

Keep in your mind and heart that the next significant thing on God's timetable is the return of Jesus Christ – and in light of that rents and mortgages and property prices should lose their power over us.

The bigger picture – the perspective of the great day that is coming – should deal with the problem of jealousy in our hearts.

So - we should put it off.

Not only do I put it off – but I am told to put on the Lord Jesus Christ.

What does that mean?

Think on Christ and the life he lived.

He never got jealous – He was content with what the Father gave Him – He never quarrelled with anyone because they had more than He had. He never grew resentful that someone had something that He wanted.

We are told He had nowhere to lay his head and call His own – and we also read he was always thankful for all His Father had provided for Him.

Can we see the importance of the mind and attitude of Christ to touch our hearts and allow it to transform our lives?

If we trust in Christ then one tangible evidence is that we trust in the promises given to us in scripture:

There are many, but here are just two:

The words of Jesus:

“Seek first the Kingdom of God and all the other things you need will be given to you as well. So do not worry about tomorrow – for tomorrow will worry about itself”

Pauls testimony when writing to the Philippians:

“And my God will meet all your needs according to His glorious riches in Christ Jesus”

If these words are true – how can we let jealousy dominate our hearts and mind? We are to keep putting on Christ - until the grip of jealousy is broken – however long it takes.

Now, I do recognise that it is much easier to talk about these things than to be experiencing it and living it out.

Putting aside the desires of the sinful nature and then clothing ourselves with the lord Jesus Christ is not something that is easy - or that is a one off event. It is a process - it is a big challenge to have the discipline and determination to do this daily.

But there is no short cut - for that is how we grow and are transformed.

Paul in Romans 13 is urging us to make it our goal - both individually and corporately. So - in light of that great day that is coming - let us commit ourselves afresh to growing in Love, growing in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ - and continue to work out what that means in practice.

There was a veteran French Climber - he was greatly experienced but died after a fall in the French Alps.

he was buried where he fell - they put a simple cross on the grave and just three words were inscribed:

“He died climbing”

That is a great epitaph for any Christian believer is it not - certainly want it to be mine. By God's grace it can be.