

Hear what the Spirit is saying

Sunday Morning at St. Hugh's in Idyllwild, California

September 6, 2020 | Pentecost +14

Collect for Proper 18

Grant us, O Lord, to trust in you with all our hearts; for, as you always resist the proud who confide in their own strength, so you never forsake those who make their boast of your mercy; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen.** ~BCP 233

Ezekiel 33:7-11 NRSV

In our first lesson the prophet Ezekiel is like a watchman: it is his responsibility to warn the wicked, but it is the individual's responsibility to stop sinning.

⁷ So you, mortal, I have made a sentinel for the house of Israel; whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. ⁸ If I say to the wicked, "O wicked ones, you shall surely die," and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but their blood I will require at your hand. ⁹ But if you warn the wicked to turn from their ways, and they do not turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but you will have saved your life. ¹⁰ Now you, mortal, say to the house of Israel, Thus you have said: "Our transgressions and our sins weigh upon us, and we waste away because of them; how then can we live?" ¹¹ Say to them, As I live, says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you die, O house of Israel?

Romans 13:8-14 NRSV

In this reading Paul summarizes the heart of the law and urges a way of life in full awareness of the nearness of salvation

⁸ Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. ⁹ The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet"; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself." ¹⁰ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law. ¹¹ 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; ¹² the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; ¹³ let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. ¹⁴ Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Matthew 18:15-20 NRSV

Our gospel presents teaching about how to deal with sin and grievances within the Christian community.

¹⁵ Jesus said, “If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. ¹⁶ But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷ If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. ¹⁸ Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹ Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

Psalm 119:33-40 BCP 616

Our Psalm Response asks for the Lord’s guidance and promises to keep God’s commandments always.

- 33 Teach me, O Lord, the way of your statutes, *
and I shall keep it to the end.
- 34 Give me understanding, and I shall keep your law; *
I shall keep it with all my heart.
- 35 Make me go in the path of your commandments, *
for that is my desire.
- 36 Incline my heart to your decrees * and not to unjust gain.
- 37 Turn my eyes from watching what is worthless; *
give me life in your ways.
- 38 Fulfill your promise to your servant, *
which you make to those who fear you.
- 39 Turn away the reproach which I dread, *
because your judgments are good.
- 40 Behold, I long for your commandments; *
in your righteousness preserve my life.

*Love does no wrong to a neighbor;
therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.*

Romans 13:10



Commentary on Romans 13:8-14. A homiletical perspective.

By David Bartlett, Professor of New Testament, Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia

There is a great half truth that drives much of our theology and much of our preaching. The semi-truth is that gospel is one thing and law is something else entirely. Sometimes that is fair enough. Sometimes law drives us, harasses us, punishes us, and terrifies us. Grace accepts us, blesses us, redeems us, and encourages us. However, sometimes a more nuanced reading of Scripture suggests that law itself can be gospel, good news. Sometimes the biblical writer who affirms that most clearly is, of all people, the apostle Paul.

Here are three ways in which the law provides good news in this passage from Romans 13. First, these verses, like all the material in Romans 12–14, spell out the significance of the good news that Paul declares in Romans 1–11. The good news is that we all sin and fall short of God’s glory but that all are justified by grace (Rom. 3). The good news is that our faith will be reckoned to us as righteousness, just as Abraham’s was (Rom. 4). The good news is that in Christ humankind takes on a new identity and a new hope; Adam’s story is reversed, to the glory of God (Rom. 5). The good news is that, rightly understood, the law can be an invitation to daily faithfulness. Because of what God has done, is doing, and will do for us in Jesus Christ, we live with the possibility of genuine transformation.

There is a great line in Jean Anouilh’s play *Becket* where Henry II, entirely befuddled by Thomas à Becket’s new faith and by his new vocabulary, says to his friend: “*Absurdly*. That word isn’t like you!” Becket replies, “Perhaps; I am no longer like myself.”¹

Romans 13:8–14 assures us that we no longer need be entirely like ourselves. It shows us a picture of the new persons we have become:

¹ Jean Anouilh, *Becket*, trans. Lucienne Hill (New York: Riverhead Books, 1995), 102.

loving our neighbors as we love ourselves. (A quick aside: a lot of contemporary therapeutic theory suggests that we need to love ourselves more, and no doubt there is something to that. Paul, being Paul, did not have much trouble with self-esteem; for him, the transformation was to be enabled to be as caring, enthusiastic, and proactive for other people as he quite easily was for himself.)

Second, in ways that we might not have imagined, Romans 13:8–14 shifts the burden of the law into a yoke that, if not exactly easy, is at least imaginable—almost within range. One reason law could be a burden in the first century, as in the twenty-first, is that law can multiply into laws—almost endlessly. On the days when we are even slightly scrupulous we can spend all day counting the ways our behavior might go wrong. In secular law something as relatively short as the U.S. Constitution gets interpreted and reinterpreted with reams of laws and reams of decisions on the meanings of the law.

Paul reverses the process: the multiplicity is transformed to unity. The law is condensed from its extended permutations to something quite solid, palpable, and near. See that neighbor? Love that person as you love yourself. Act out to the other the best intentions you would wish for yourself.

1 Corinthians 12:31–13:8

^{12:31} But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.

^{13:1} If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ² And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³ If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. ⁴ Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant ⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶ it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. ⁷ It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. ⁸ Love never ends

From our Baptismal Covenant (BCP 305): Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself? *We will, with God's help.*

From our confession of sin (BCP 360) Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have

done, and by what we have left undone. *We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We are truly sorry and we humbly repent.*

This is one of the few places where Paul seems to echo the tradition that comes from Jesus himself, when Jesus gives the Great Commandment (Mark 12:29-31).

²⁸ One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?” ²⁹ Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one;’ ³⁰ you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ ³¹ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” ³² Then the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that ‘he is one, and besides him there is no other’; ³³ and ‘to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,’ and ‘to love one’s neighbor as oneself,’—this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” ³⁴ When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” After that no one dared to ask him any question. Mark 12:28-34 NRSV

Remember that the Great Commandment is a twofold commandment—not really one, but not really two separable commandments either. One could suggest that Romans 1–11 spells out the first part of the commandment: “How do we love God with heart, mind, soul, and strength?” Clue: have faith in Jesus. Romans 12–14 shows the various ways in which we live out the second part: Love your neighbor as you love yourself.

The summary is itself good news.

Finally, note how thoroughly the admonition to follow the law is shaped by Paul’s hope about what God is doing in history, about the last days. We live faithfully and lovingly in the present because God has promised faithfulness and love to us—beginning now, but consummated in the age to come.

This is hard stuff to preach because for most of us—whatever our other theological convictions—the hardships and blessings of the day seem sufficient to themselves. Yet Paul sounds again a great theme of the Christian tradition: the day of Christ has begun; the light is dawning. The law we now obey is the law that is appropriate to the new day in which we are about to live, to the new land we are about to inhabit.

When you preach these last verses, notice how the metaphors pile up: light/dark; day/night; drunkenness/sobriety. This would be a good Sunday to let metaphor carry some of the sermon. This text is not proposition but poetry—one picture of redemption after another, a collage foreshadowing the salvation that is to come, that impinges upon us even now.

“Dress appropriately,” says Paul, “for the great day coming”. “Put on the armor of God,” or in different words, “Put on the Lord Jesus Christ.” Quite likely the Roman Christians remember their baptisms, coming up from the baptismal waters wrapped in a white robe as a sign of their membership in a new commonwealth, a new family. Jesus Christ, in this passage, becomes God’s armor: his obedience enables our obedience. His mercy not only forgives our trespasses; it fortifies us against temptation.

Paul ends the passage a bit anticlimactically. “Put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh,” he writes (v. 14). By “flesh” you will remember he does not simply mean the usual suspects: gluttony, drunkenness, and selfish sexuality. “Flesh” for Paul represents all the devices and desires by which we try to fortify ourselves—not with Jesus, but against Jesus and against our neighbor. “Make no provision for the flesh” means “By God’s grace turn from your self-absorption.” It paraphrases and sums up the whole law: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year A, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, vol. 4 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 39-43.