

Sermon: Sunday 6 September 2026

Focus text: Romans 13:8-end

May I speak and be heard in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

Getting into the Word

There are some passages of Scripture that are comforting.

There are passages that seem to wrap themselves around us like a blanket and say: *You are safe. God is with you. Do not be afraid.*

And then there are passages like this one. They sound simple.

“Owe no one anything, except to love one another.

Love your neighbour as yourself.

Love does no wrong to a neighbour.

Love is the fulfilling of the law.

Put on the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Simple words.

But I suspect they are among the most demanding words in the whole New Testament.

Because Paul is not simply asking us to be nicer people.

He is asking us to imagine what happens when **love becomes the fundamental way in which we understand our relationship with God, with other people, with society and with the earth itself.**

And that is a much harder ask.

Because most of us can manage kindness, right? Most of us can be pleasant.

Most of us can love the people we already love and we do!

The real Christian challenge begins when love asks something of us that we would rather not give or negotiate.

When the neighbour is difficult.

When the stranger makes us uncomfortable.

When somebody has hurt us intentionally or not.

When somebody holds convictions that we find deeply troubling.

When loving someone requires us to change.

When loving someone requires us to surrender some power.

When love asks us not simply to feel differently, but to **act differently.**

That is where Romans 13 begins to bite.

Paul says:

“Owe no one anything, except to love one another.”

It is an extraordinary image.

We usually think of debt as something we want to reduce or eliminate all together. You borrow money because you need it, and then the goal is to reach the moment when the debt has disappeared because its been repaid.

Paul gives us a different kind of debt.

There is one debt which the Christian should never finally settle. **The debt of love.**

Because work and output of love is never finished.

There is always another person to notice.

Another relationship to repair.

Another injustice to confront.

Another stranger to welcome.

Another wound to tend.

Another opportunity to be generous.

Another ecosystem whose flourishing depends upon the choices we make.

Christian discipleship is therefore not a project that we complete. Right! On to the next thing! We do not eventually arrive at the point where we can say: *I have loved enough now.*

There is always more room for love to grow.

And Paul goes further.

He says that this love actually **fulfils the law.**

“Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.”

That is another remarkable statement.

Paul is not saying that the commandments do not matter.

He is saying something more profound.

He is telling us what the commandments were always trying to achieve.

Do not murder.

Do not steal.

Do not commit adultery.

Do not covet.

These commands establish boundaries around human relationships because every person possesses a dignity which I am not entitled to violate.

The law says: *Do not destroy your neighbour.*

Love says: *Learn to seek your neighbour's good.*

The law can tell me where the boundary is.

But Love asks me what I can do for the person on the other side of it.

And that distinction matters.

Because it is possible to obey a rule without becoming a loving person.

It is possible to be technically correct and spiritually unkind.

It is possible to defend the boundaries of religion while missing the God whom the religion is supposed to reveal.

And Paul knows this.

And that is why he spent much of Romans wrestling with the relationship between law, grace, faith and the new life given in Christ. And his conclusion is that Christians should become people who are obsessed with getting everything technically right.

It is that we should become people whose lives are increasingly shaped by the love of God.

Paul and the world in which he wrote

It is worth pausing to remember where Paul is writing.

The Christians to whom Romans is addressed are living in Rome, the centre of an enormous imperial power.

They live in a society where status matters enormously.

There are citizens and non-citizens. Wealthy and desperately poor.

There are masters and enslaved people.

There are people with political influence and people who possess almost none.

Family, ethnicity, social rank and patronage all shape a person's place in society.

The Roman world could be extraordinarily sophisticated, but it was not built around the modern conviction that every human being possesses equal dignity and rights.

And into that world comes this extraordinary Christian worldview:

Your neighbour matters because God loves them.

Not because they are useful or powerful.

Not because they are one of *us*.

Not because they can repay us.

Not because they have the correct credentials.

They matter because they are beloved by God.

And the early Church had to work out what that meant (*and sadly we still are*).
Romans is written to a community in which Jews and Gentiles are learning to belong to one another.
People with very different religious backgrounds. Different practices. Different assumptions. Different histories.
Different understandings of what it meant to be faithful.

They had every opportunity to divide themselves.
And yet Paul keeps returning to the astonishing claim that in Christ they belong to one another.

That is part of what makes this passage so relevant to us.
Of course, our world is different.
We have democratic government.
We have universal suffrage and concepts of human rights.
We have legal frameworks that, at least in principle, recognise equality and dignity in ways the Roman world did not.
And we should be grateful for those developments.

But human nature **has not changed** quite as dramatically as our institutions have.
We still divide people into categories.
We still instinctively sort people into *us* and *them*.
We still decide whose suffering matters.
We still find it easier to understand people who look like us, speak like us, vote like us, worship like us or share our assumptions.
We still live in a world where wealth and power can determine whose voice is heard.

And now we possess something Paul could scarcely have imagined: technologies capable of placing the opinions, fears and grievances of millions of people directly into our hands. We can encounter hundreds of people before breakfast without having a meaningful conversation with a single one of them.

We can know someone's political opinion without knowing their name.
We can condemn a stranger without ever hearing their story.
We can turn human beings into headlines, hashtags, statistics and arguments.
The Roman world had its divisions.
Our world has invented new ways of accelerating them.
And into both worlds comes the same question:
What does it mean to love my neighbour?

Who is the neighbour?

Jesus was asked this question. *Who is my neighbour?*

It is a wonderfully convenient question because, if you can define the neighbour narrowly enough, you can keep the demands of love manageable.

If my neighbour is the person I already like, I can cope.

If my neighbour is the person who agrees with me, that is easier.

If my neighbour is the person who deserves my help, I can decide who qualifies.

But Jesus keeps breaking open those boundaries.

The neighbour becomes the person from whom we instinctively recoil.

The neighbour becomes the person whose need interrupts our plans.

And that is where Christian love becomes costly.

There is a quotation I have carried with me for some time:

“I would rather love and be judged by God for loving, welcoming, including and advocating, than not to, and discover that this was what God required.”

I think there is something profoundly Christian in that instinct.

Because sometimes the Church becomes so anxious about getting love wrong that we end up withholding it altogether.

We become frightened that we might welcome the wrong person.

That inclusion might somehow compromise us.

That generosity might be exploited.

That standing beside somebody might make us vulnerable.

That advocating for someone might put us on the wrong side of an argument.

In the South African context, it is not a right to be buried out of a church. I led Parish Churches that had very strict policies around who could be and what the requirements were. It was awfully legislative. I had to help each of those communities understand that our core purpose as the Church is to love and to embody that love especially to families who are grieving and want to give their loved ones a decent burial.

“But they don’t belong (not on the Parish role), they have not contributed, they never attended any of our service, we don’t know them”. My response: “so what!?! My role here is to love like Jesus would and if it means we never see them again, that’s okay. I did my bit. Now you do yours!”

And so, we become very good at explaining why love must have limits.

Of course, Christian love requires wisdom.

Love does not mean tolerating abuse. Absolutely not!

Love does not mean pretending that injustice is acceptable.

Love sometimes has to say *no*.

Sometimes love confronts.

Sometimes love draws a boundary precisely because someone is being harmed.
But even then, the purpose is not humiliation or revenge.
The purpose is life.
The purpose is restoration.
The purpose is that the person who is being harmed is protected, and the person who is doing harm is confronted with the truth.
Christian love is not sentimental.
It is courageous.
It is sometimes disruptive.
And it is always concerned with the dignity of the other.

The armour of light

Which brings us to the extraordinary language at the end of the passage.
Paul says: “You know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep.” (I can hear my mother waking me up for school on a cold Monday morning in July).
Wake up!
There is urgency here!

Christian faith is not an invitation to sleepwalk through the world. It is an invitation to Look. To pay attention.

Notice what is happening.
Notice who is being left behind.
Notice where fear is taking hold.
Notice what your own habits are doing to other people.

And then Paul says:

“Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light.”

Armour?

It is a surprising image for a passage about love. But Paul knows that love requires courage.

Light is not passive.

If you put on the armour of light, you are choosing to live visibly according to a different set of values.

So what does that armour look like in 2026?

It might look like **truth**, when falsehood is easier and more profitable.

It might look like **patience**, when outrage is rewarded.

It might look like **curiosity**, when the algorithm keeps feeding us reasons to despise people we have never met.

It might look like **hospitality**, when the stranger is being portrayed as a threat.
It might look like **advocacy**, when somebody has no power to speak for themselves.
It might look like **humility**, the willingness to discover that I have misunderstood.
It might look like **courage**, the willingness to speak when silence would be more comfortable.

Bring it home

It might look like **involvement**:

Choirs- in your case, helping us make worship transcendent for those who come through our doors, often carrying the world on their shoulders and you help transport us right into the presence of God with your voices.

Bellringers- in your case, calling people to worship through your melodies in our ancient bell towers, looking after one another up there and welcoming those who otherwise may find it difficult to be involved in other ways.

Young people - who returned to school this past week- It might look like refusing to laugh when another person is being humiliated or bullied, but standing up for them. It might mean resisting the temptation to share something on social media simply because it seems funny but diminishes the dignity of another.

It is about becoming people whose lives can withstand the darkness without becoming dark themselves.

And perhaps that is why Paul finishes with:

“Put on the Lord Jesus Christ.

”

The armour of light is ultimately Christ himself.

We become people who know that we are loved.

And therefore we become people who can risk loving.

Not perfectly or without mistakes.

Not without boundaries or wisdom or disagreement.

But generously. Courageously. Persistently.

The debt of love remains.

There is always another person.

Another wound.

Another stranger.

Another act of justice.

Another opportunity to welcome.

Another piece of creation entrusted to our care.

And so Paul says:

“Owe no one anything, except to love one another.”

It is a debt we will never finish paying. And perhaps that is precisely the point. Because every time we pay it, even imperfectly, the world becomes a little more like the kingdom Christ has promised. The Church becomes a little more like the Body of Christ. Our communities become a little more human.

For Julian had the last word on this.

“Love was his meaning.” And love has a name. His name is Jesus.

And perhaps our task is simply to make that meaning and that name visible. **Amen.**