

***“Love is the Rule”***

**(Romans 13.8-10)**

**Grant Bullen**

***Introduction***

A friend interstate, who reads my sermons via email, has responded to my recent preaching on *Romans* saying... ‘You argue that Paul is teaching us how to follow the spiritual path. But he’s always going on about rules and regulations – even petty stuff like women covering their heads in worship... Surely this is him establishing a new law. And that means he’s contradicting Jesus who says it’s about love, not law.’

Fair enough – it *is* really easy to read Paul this way. Because there *is* a real focus on *behaviour* in his letters, and he *does* talk a lot about codes and conventions for Christians... how we *should* behave... what’s acceptable and what’s not.

And it’s also true that often the Church has *used* Paul this way. It’s suited the institution, in its desire for power, authority and control, to promote Paul as a *rule-maker*. Sections of our church still do this today... for instance, in using him to promote the *headship of men*... and thus deny women equal authority in family, church and society. ‘Paul the law-maker’ will undoubtedly get a good airing in the national debate about marriage-equality in the coming months. It suits *our* agenda to *use* him this way.

But Paul himself would be horrified. ‘That’s *NOT* what I’m saying at all!’ And today’s text from *Romans* makes his views on *law-keeping* crystal clear... But first a little theology and a bit of historical context...

***Love and the Law***

We can only understand Paul’s *theology* – his belief – through looking at the big themes of what he wrote over the years... not by focusing on one text. (And he’s a preacher more than a careful theologian, so there *are* contradictions!) Throughout his letters, Paul argues that in Christ we’re set free... for the old world of fear and guilt is swept away. We are now living a new life... and in this life

the only law is... *love*. So the *old Law* – and he’s talking about the Jewish Law – is swept away *with* the *old* world. **Not** because it’s necessarily bad in what it asks us to do, but because you can never ever be reunited with God... never ever enter the new life of Christ... by law-keeping. Simply, the *Law* doesn’t work... it can’t achieve what it set out to achieve.<sup>1</sup> The *Law* was a valiant attempt by the old faith of Israel, but it proved futile. With Christ we’re ushered into a new world, and law-keeping, rule-following... is too small, too narrow to navigate the big open space of God’s grace. His theology is... ‘*New life... freedom... in following the path of love*’.<sup>2</sup>

And there are two important points of historical context that we need to understand...

Firstly... this is highly contentious and it’s a live and vigorous debate. There are many in the emerging young Christian church who argue that the whole Jewish faith, including observance of the *whole* law code – all its rules and regulations – must be observed to the letter by Christians. And the church’s major competitor within Jewish communities – and this is where the church began – are the Pharisees. And the Pharisees argue that reconciliation with God happens by... a careful and strict keeping of the law... with all its rules and regulations. Paul is breaking radical new ground here... and the debate is vigorous... and sometimes violent.

Secondly, we need to remember the Letters are not Paul’s *first* proclamation of the Gospel. They come later than his first missionary journeys in which all these new churches were established. His first proclamation of Christ was ‘*freedom by following the new law of love*’. But Paul assumed everyone who heard this would remember that *love* – if it’s to be worthy of the name – is expressed in ethical and moral behaviour. Too many of his new Christians however said, ‘*Beauty... if we’re free, we can do whatever we like!*’ Paul was horrified! And so, much of what we hear in the Letters is Paul trying to correct that misperception... hence the focus on *proper behaviour*.

We can hear both these factors – the vigorous debate... and the need to correct a fatal misrepresentation – in these few verses today...

Pauls says... If your love is to be truly *love*, it will be expressed in how you behave with each other.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Reconciliation with God.

<sup>2</sup> I know this is a gross simplification... but I too am a preacher... not a careful theologian!

<sup>3</sup> He doesn’t do it in this particular section, but in other parts of *Romans* as with all his other letters, he reminds them of the codes and conventions that reflect ethical and moral love... and that keep communities together.

Then.... here's the theological debate... If you're truly and genuinely loving, then you're going to keep (indeed exceed) the rules and regulations...

*"When you love others, you complete what the law has been after all along. The law code—don't sleep with another person's spouse, don't take someone's life, don't take what isn't yours, don't always be wanting what you don't have, and any other "don't" you can think of—finally adds up to this: Love other people as well as you do yourself."*

It's one of the very rare times we hear Paul directly echo the words of Christ<sup>4</sup> ...*"Love your neighbour as yourself."* (NRSV)

And if you're genuinely loving, then you won't need to be slavish about keeping the rules, because you'll have done all that and more anyway. In fact... *"love is the fulfilling of the law"* (NRSV) Which Eugene Peterson helpfully amplifies as... *"When you add up everything in the law code, the sum total is love."*

### **Conclusion – Love is the Path**

This is Paul's direct counsel to us as Christian people... *"You can't go wrong when you love others."*

As a simple principle I would say... *when you don't know what to do, try the path of love... because at least you can't do damage that way.* But I don't want to be glib with this... because discerning *the loving thing to do*, isn't always easy...

As a young priest I preached a good sermon on the priority of love and forgiveness. Later that week a parishioner made contact to say how powerful she'd found it. She *had* been intending to leave her husband, but on the basis of my sermon she'd decided she had to give it another go. (I do remember feeling a bit scared when she told me this...) A couple of months later she asked me to visit her... I found the house all packed-up. She'd learned her husband was sexually abusing their daughter, and she was leaving and never looking back. I was grateful for her understanding of me as a young priest – there was no accusation or blame – but I also resolved never to speak glibly of such matters as love and forgiveness.

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<sup>4</sup> Mark 12.28-34

And so today I'm willing to back Paul when he says, "*You can't go wrong when you love others*"... because it's true. But I also know, that discerning the truly loving path, is not always as easy as today's text might suggest.

Nevertheless, when I find myself in a complex and confusing situation, when I don't know what to do, I assume that *love* is the place to start. There are many places where rules, codes and conventions can't help much, and the question to be wrestled with is... '*What does it mean for me to prioritise love in this situation?*'

### **Postscript...**

I don't want to pretend it's easy to read Paul and know what he is saying to us today. He is speaking from a very different culture and this needs to be 'translated' not applied literally. And there are contradictions within his writing and thought. And there is the confusion over which Letters were actually his... and which ones were later writings ascribed to him to gain credibility and authority. Ask me if you want to know more about this...