

... give me life in your ways

Ezekiel 33:7–11

Psalms 119:33–40

Romans 13:8–14

Matthew 18:15–20

Text: Psalm 119:36-37

Turn my heart to your decrees, and not to selfish gain.

Turn my eyes from looking at vanities; give me life in your ways.

Introduction

You have, no doubt, heard the sage advice, “Be careful what you wish for.” For Christians we might say, “Be careful what you pray for.” I hear the Psalmist’s prayer, “Turn my heart to your decrees, and not to selfish gain.” I wonder if I am ready to pray such a thing because I do like certain luxuries of life. Another translation of the sentence reads, “incline my heart to your testimonies and not towards financial gain.” And as I examine my own heart I wonder if I would be more excited to hear the word of God or hold a winning lottery ticket.

“Turn my eyes from looking at vanities; give me life in your ways.” The bright lights and glamour of this world are quite appealing. Do I really want God to give me life in his ways or do I prefer a little ‘vanity’ sprinkled here and there? Am I really ready to go all in on God’s ways? Vain things are things that lack substance or worth or are fruitless. The Apostle Paul said something very similar to the Psalmist when he wrote, “make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires,” or “Don’t think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature,” as another translation put it. We are bombarded by a culture that is fixated on the gratification of desire and the message is packaged in such a way as to appear as if this is what life is all about. ‘Live life your way,’ we are told. To pray for life in God’s ways seems, culturally speaking, to surrender too much of me.

I want to pray these prayers and the challenge for any believer who wants to pray such things is how we live out the convictions these prayers express in a culture whose messaging is counter to such a life. Over the course of my life Christian convictions about life have been pushed to the margins. We don’t live in Christendom any more. The ideologies that dominate today are often hostile to the ways of Christ. Being a believer is increasingly unwelcome (unless you keep it to yourself and don’t make trouble). How do we navigate life in such a situation? The Apostle Paul lived in a time like the one we are increasingly facing. The

structures of Roman society were not supportive of Christian commitments. And in the portion we read from his letter to the Romans he was laying down some principles for living as a Christian in a world whose cultural messaging was anything but Christian; for living life in the Saviour's ways in a world that was often hostile to such ways.

“Give me life in your ways,” prays the Psalmist. In our reading from Paul's letter to the Romans, he teaches two major things that ought to guide us. Christ's love and knowing what time it is.

1. I invite you to reflect with me about the love that Paul says is foundational to living life in God's ways. Why did I call this Christ's love when the text we read simply says ‘love?’ Paul's ethical guidance for believers states that, “the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.’ We hear the popular cultural slogan, Love is Love. We are inundated with this message. And in such a culture we may read this sentence from scripture and wonder if Paul is saying something similar? How are we to understand the ethic of love that Paul describes?

I remind you of something we have explored before which has to do with translation of the Greek into English. In Greek there are four words that we translate with our one English word ‘love.’ The first is a general word for love and friendship (φιλία); the second (ἔρως) has to do principally with sexual love; the third (στοργή) is generally used in contexts that has to do with love among family members; the fourth (ἀγάπη) is the word the New Testament writers use to speak of God's love for the world on display in God's self-giving in the Son on the cross. Which of these four words is Paul using when he speaks of this love that is to guide us in our living? He uses the fourth word, ἀγάπη. The word that, in his mind, has the self-forgetful, self-giving love of Christ in view.

When Paul writes “Owe no one anything, except to love one another;” ‘love one another’ is a citation of Jesus' command that Jesus gave his disciples on the night before he gave up his life for us. (John 13:34) Which Greek word does Jesus use in his new commandment—ἀγάπη. It is interesting to note that this word ἀγάπη (love) is not found in any extant nonbiblical Greek writing.¹ It wasn't commonly used by Greek writers. In the New Testament the noun form of the word appears about 120 times—75 of which occur in the letters of Paul. It also appears in about twenty instances in the Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures. Clearly the

¹ Richard N. Longenecker, *The New International Greek Testament Commentary: The Epistle to the Romans*, Eerdmans, 2016. p. 979.

New Testament writers have taken over this word to speak of the self-forgetful, self-giving of Jesus Christ at the cross. This is the love Paul has in mind and why I described it as Christ's love. Self-forgetful, self-giving.

So Paul is thinking about a very particular love. Of this love he says that “love does no wrong to a neighbour.” Underline the word ‘wrong’ for a moment. This love is a love informed by the righteousness of God that is expressed in the ten words God gave to Israel. All the commands—you shall not commit adultery, murder, steal nor covet—are summed up in this word, “love your neighbour as yourself.” Love (*αγαπη*) doesn't cheer wrong doing. If you want to see this in action read how Jesus walked in company with his followers. Consider how he treats the men and women who gave themselves to him and you have a good picture of what this love looks like.

For the Christian, this love (*αγαπη*) norms and informs all our other loves in life. The self-giving self-forgetful love of Christ shapes and guides us in our friendships, sexual love, and family relationship. It lifts, orders, and blesses these other loves with a love that is characterized by a focus on the well-being of the other. A love that regards the other as a person for whom Christ has given his life. A love that would flee away from anything that would harm the other person's relationship with God.

We read from Matthew's gospel some sayings of Jesus with regard to discipline among believers. Yes, love (*αγαπη*) disciplines. The context of Jesus' sayings on discipline is his severe pronouncement about putting a stumbling block before any of these little ones who believe in me. The assumption of one member sinning against another is that the sin itself threatened relationships of believers with one another. Often we focus in this text to determine a process of what to do in such a case. I invite you to think about the importance of relationships implied by this text.

The discipline outlined implies the importance of personal relationships between members of the community. Just as it is important not to cause any of these little ones to stumble so it is also important that no one impudently sin against another. The notion of an isolated individual Christian is not considered a possibility. The Christian is always to be accountable to a community. And the importance of the community receives indirect confirmation in the divinely granted authority of its leaders, in the promise of answered prayer in the administration of the church, and in the promise of the continuing presence of the risen Christ in the midst of those gathered in his name.

In our world that champions individualism this sounds strange because something else is considered to be more important than me. Some consider Old Testament laws regarding adultery outdated and harsh. Clearly those laws considered family relationships to be of great importance. By comparison our laws today consider personal property to be of great importance. What does love (*αγαπη*) tell us about what is important? It is predicated on righted relationship with God and right relationships with one another.

We read from the prophet Ezekiel God's declaration, "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." The scriptures also tell us that God is love therefore we understand that love isn't the overlooking of that which is wrong. Love (*αγαπη*), Christ's love, points in the direction that life, true life, life as it was created to be, is in the ways of God.

2. The second thing Paul pointed to in understanding how to live life in God's ways is knowing what time it is. "Besides this," (what Paul has been saying about love) Paul continues, "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; the night is far gone, the day is near." Paul doesn't have a clock or watch or cell phone in mind here; he doesn't mean that it is a few minutes before a particular hour. He means time with respect to the unfolding of God's purposes for the world.

If Paul meant the time on a clock (or sundial) he would have used the Greek word (*χρονος*) *chronos*, from which we get our word chronology. Instead Paul uses the Greek word (*καιρος*) *kairos* which signifies a proper or opportune time for action. While *chronos* is quantitative, *kairos* has a qualitative, permanent nature. If you wanted to speak of the time you were going to meet someone for a date you would use *chronos*; if you were later speaking about that date as being the time when you fell in love you would use the word *kairos*.

You know what time it is, says Paul. It is the opportune time to wake from sleep. This is the day of salvation. In the New Testament, and in the Apostle Paul, the new age began in the event of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ and he will reign forever and ever. The new age now overlaps with the present age of sin that is coming to an end. There is a 'now' and a 'not yet' about this new age.

We live ‘now’ in that age by faith; it is ‘not yet’ with respect the final consummation when our Lord returns to judge the living and the dead.

Believers live in that new age now. We live in the light of the day of the Lord now which is apprehended by faith. This is why Paul says “Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light; let us live honourably as in the day, (we know what time it is) not in revelling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, (live life in his ways) and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Carl Trueman is a professor of biblical and religious studies at Grove City College in Pennsylvania. He published an article in May of this year [Hope In an age of nay-saying](#) in which he spoke about the graduation speech given by a young student. Trueman writes, “Her argument was simple but profound, biblical and Christian: The best homes are those that prepare us for our next home. And our ultimate home is heaven, a final destination that should have a serious effect on the shape of each of the temporary homes that mark our sojourn along the way.”

When she thought of her college home and how it prepared her for that future home she said that two things stood out. “The first is Western Pennsylvania in the fall. ... the vibrance of leaves turning red in pockets and the familiarity of the air gradually cooling helps me consider the nature of change. During fall ... we see that the world is always changing. It is transitory. At the same time, the beauty of it all points us to the wonder of the God who made our world and his beautiful plan to bring his people to an eternal home.

“Secondly,” she continued, “I think about singing worship songs and hymns with other students. Whether in chapel or at church ... there may be few better opportunities to taste heaven than to sing God’s praises with others. For Christians, singing together functions as a shadow for the future reality of worshipping God in our home in heaven.

The future home where the new heaven and earth come together; creation fully restored and no longer subject to decay. If this world, though subject to decay, holds such wonders of beauty of our Lord’s creative genius then creation no longer subject to decay must be spectacular. In that world nothing will inhibit love’s glory; sin is gone and love will give way to more love. There are those friendships in life where we have tasted great joys of human companionship. If this is possible

in this sin ridden world then the uninhibited joys of friendship in the world to come must be beyond spectacular.

To pray the Psalmist's prayer "Turn my eyes from looking at vanities; give me life in your ways" is a prayer to live now in this present life the values of that future world to come.