

nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armour of light.

"Our salvation is nearer now" — the full realisation of Jesus' victory over sin and death at the closing of the age and His second coming, Romans 8:23; Hebrews 9:28; 1 Peter 1:5.

"The night... the day" — the present age, with its spiritual darkness and depravity, "is nearly over" in the perspective of keenly anticipating the "almost here" next great event in God's plan of redemption, the return of Jesus Christ and consummation of His just and righteous kingdom.

• **For further study**, read how the OT repeatedly predicts "the day of the Lord" when God intervenes to save His people and judge their enemies, Isaiah 13:4-13; Jeremiah 30:8-9; Joel 2:32; 3:18; Obadiah 1:15-18.

• **For further study**, see NT teaching on the imminent coming of the end times, 1 Corinthians 7:29; Philippians 4:5; James 5:9; 1 Peter 4:7; 1 John 2:18.

SUMMARY Live well, live by love, avoiding actions which cause harm to others. Rather than acting from selfish motives, wear the uniform of Jesus and live up to it.

APPLICATION The world is not naturally a sacrificial place — we don't want to let the other driver into the line of traffic, or give our place in the queue to another. But this is a key to understanding what is meant by the "love [which] is the fulfilment of the law". It's about honouring marriage, not abusing it, protecting not murdering; giving freely rather than stealing; and sharing rather than coveting. It is living in the opposite spirit to the world's selfishness. This is how we want to be found, when Jesus comes again.

QUESTION How do we live by love, without becoming a push-over for others?

PRAYER Lord, we consider how many things, even spiritual activities, reflect the ownership of man rather than the Lordship of Christ.

Help us to let go of what is not really ours, to seek prayerful agreement with others rather than our own way, and to make the hallmark of our discussions and decisions, the love which defers and honours and protects...

...That Jesus may be seen to be our Lord. We pray in His majestic name. Amen.

13-14 Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh.

"Behave decently" — in the avoidance of gross and obvious sins like debauchery and sexual immorality, but also in relational sins like quarrelling and jealousy. As in the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5-7, less evident attitudes are highlighted because of the evil actions they lead to.

"Clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ" — wear the uniform and live up to it. This would recall baptisms, where believers coming out of the water would put on new clothes to symbolise their transition into new life with new values.

The Living Word

Bible readings for Sunday, September 6, 2020, with explanatory notes

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Bible study on the Revised Common Lectionary passages for **September 6**
Prepare by reading the Bible passages beforehand — read again to reflect on the pulpit teaching

Theme: **How we contend for God's righteous way**

Psalm 119:33-40, Ezekiel 33:7-11 — The call to uphold God's truth

Matthew 18:15-20 — Believers must be willing to reconcile divisions

Romans 13:8-14 — Loving others is living ready for Jesus' return

Psalm 119:33-40, Ezekiel 33:7-11 — The call to uphold God's truth

Those who know God are like watchmen, responsible for warning others to live right

33 Teach me, LORD, the way of Your decrees, that I may follow it to the end.

34 Give me understanding, so that I may keep Your law and obey it with all my heart.

"Teach me... give me understanding" — in this section the poet is writing in the form of prayer, with a desire to be found obedient.

35 Direct me in the path of Your commands, for there I find delight.

36 Turn my heart toward Your statutes and not toward selfish gain.

"Your commands... Your statutes" — or we would say, Your Word, or Scripture. The original hearers would have followed an oral tradition, hearing Scripture read and discussed until it was memorised.

"Turn my heart" — wanting to do what is right in God's sight comes from a changed heart. The unregenerate heart is a deceitful instinct; only salvation offers a transforming experience that brings this change.

• **For further study**, see Jeremiah 31:33; Ezekiel 11:19-20; 36:26-27; Hebrews 8:10.

37 Turn my eyes away from worthless things; preserve my life according to Your Word.

"Your Word" — or Your ways. Later in the psalm God's righteous way is depicted as a path lit up by His Word, Psalm 119:105.

38 Fulfil Your promise to Your servant, so that You may be feared.

"Worthless things" — or "vanity", NASB. The psalmist wants to focus on what is of the greatest, and most enduring, value i.e. God's Word.

39 Take away the disgrace I dread, for Your laws are good.

40 How I long for Your precepts! In Your righteousness preserve my life.

SUMMARY Turn my heart towards doing what Your Word says is right, and preserve my life.

Ezekiel 33:7-11

7 "Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the people of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from Me.

"I have made you a watchman" — almost identical words to Ezekiel's original call as a watchman for the nation, Ezekiel 3:17-21. The earlier commission emphasised God's judgment for Israel's rebellion; now this second commission will encourage the exiles to rise above their poor leadership, repent and find the path of restoration and blessing.

8 "When I say to the wicked, 'You wicked person, you will surely die,' and you do not speak out to dissuade them from their ways, that wicked person will die for their sin, and I will hold you accountable for their blood.

9 "But if you do warn the wicked person to turn from their ways and they do not do so, they will die for their sin, though you yourself will be saved.

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"If you do warn" — three groups are in view here: (1) Ezekiel and others who hear God and must act as watchmen, faithfully speaking out His message; (2) those who are slow to hear and repent, and (3) those who hear, respond and put bad attitudes behind them, v.11 (below).

10 "Son of man, say to the Israelites, 'This is what you are saying: "Our offences and sins weigh us down, and we are wasting away because of them. How then can we live?" ' "

"Our offences and sins" — a turning point, becoming aware of their sin, instead of blaming their upbringing or blaming God as they did before, Ezekiel 18:2, 19, 25.

11 "Say to them, 'As surely as I live,

SUMMARY We are like watchmen, responsible for knowing the dangers and speaking them out to those who are caught up in wrong attitudes and wickedness. God doesn't want them to die, but to turn from what is wrong, and have life and fellowship with Him.

APPLICATION The good news is, God will always reveal His good way if we seek Him, in particular through His Word. But then there is a responsibility on us to share what we discover with others who are caught up in lawless or selfish behaviour.

QUESTION *Who are the watchmen in our Christian community?*

Matthew 18:15-20 – Believers must be willing to reconcile divisions

There's a spiritual authority from heaven that inhabits our agreement

15-16 "If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.'

"Just between the two of you" — best, if it can be done, to resolve the difficulty without others becoming involved (and misunderstandings multiplying). Following Proverbs 25:9, "If you take your neighbour to court, do not betray another's confidence."

"You have won them over" — "you have gained your brother", NKJV, ESV. The objective is always restoration of whoever has "wandered off", vv.12-14, back to discipleship.

• *For further study, see Leviticus 19:17; Luke 17:3;*

declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live.

"Rather that they turn... and live" — the grace of God which in Jesus becomes the Good News of the kingdom. God doesn't want anyone to perish, 2 Peter 3:9, but to turn in repentance of attitude, and receive new life.

" 'Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, people of Israel?' "

"Turn" — God's answer to the question posed in v. 10, "How then can we live?" The good news is that God is loving and gracious, and always offers a way out to those who recognise they have chosen a wrong direction.

Galatians 6:1; 1 Timothy 5:20; Titus 3:10. Also "two or three witnesses", Deuteronomy 19:15, to the reconciliation, not the cause of difficulty.

17 "If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

"Church" — local gathered Christian community, from a word meaning 'called together assembly'. Discipline by exclusion is based on the conviction that God's people are called to be holy, and overt sin destroys fellowship, and the goal is to restore the privilege in due course.

• *For further study on restoring the wayward, see Matthew 18:10-15; Galatians 6:1; James 5:19-20.*

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.

"Whatever you bind" — there is a divine prohibition or release that, with discernment,

flows into prayerful determinations on earth.

19-20 "Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven. For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them."

SUMMARY When someone in the church behaves badly towards another, and there is a conflict, the righteous ones have a responsibility to bring them to account, privately, or with other witnesses, or even before the whole congregation. There is a particular spiritual discernment and authority given to believers who agree a matter together before the Lord. This could be to bring divided parties together in reconciliation, or a principle that applies for strategic prayer generally.

APPLICATION The church exists to reveal Jesus, to be the focus of worship through Him — and to show His way and His values to the wider world. Satan is an active enemy whose whole mission is to prevent that from happening, and stir up conflicts and disagreements wherever possible. So we need to know the Jesus way to resolve them! Things go wrong, relationships get damaged and any of us can get caught up in something which takes us off-track, so grace needs to be flowing in a prayerful process. Believers who submit to each other and the Lord in finding agreement will attract the Holy Spirit's help, and find great authority in prayer to bring reconciliation.

QUESTION *Who do you have as a prayer partner (or two) to pray and agree together before the Lord for the pressing need of the moment?*

Romans 13:8-14 – Loving others is living ready for Jesus' return

Attitudes as well as actions are important and love governs them all

8 Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law.

"Let no debt remain" — or "don't continue owing anything to anybody", more of a moral instruction than a financial one, but a warning against dishonest indebtedness through taking advantage, Psalm 37:21.

"The continuing debt to love" — no matter how sacrificially a Christian has loved, that is a debt that will never be paid off, and the requirement to go on loving remains.

9 The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery," "You shall not murder," "You shall not steal," "You shall not covet," and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: "Love your neighbour as yourself."

"Two of you on earth agree" — in the immediate context, the resolving of relationship-damaging disputes, with reconciliation helped by impartial, prayerful assistance of a coaching nature. There is a wider general principle about prayerful agreement, in which case it will be "anything" agreed to be God's will and not a selfish request.

"The commandments" — Paul quotes the seventh, sixth, eighth and tenth commandments, a sequence used in some other Jewish writings.

• *For further study, read Exodus 20:13-17; Deuteronomy 5:17-21.*

10 Love does no harm to a neighbour. Therefore love is the fulfilment of the law.

"Love is the fulfilment" — Paul reflects Jesus' teaching on the Great Commandment, and the definition of neighbour as potentially anyone the Lord brings across our path. Attempting to live by the law is to fail by breaking it, Romans 7:5. Living willingly by God's love without being under law, results in us fulfilling it.

• *For further study, read Leviticus 19:18; Deuteronomy 6:5; Matthew 22:34-40.*

11-12 And do this, understanding the present time: The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is