

Between the Cross and the Parousia Consummation: An Analysis of Paul's Love Ethics and Its Contemporary Lessons

Rantsoa Letsosa

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7062-6442>
University of Pretoria

Daniel Orogun

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8642-0724>
University of Pretoria
arcorogun2@gmail.com

Abstract

Scriptural accounts demonstrate that by Jesus's sacrificial death and transformation by the Holy Spirit, God's salvation became available in Christ, who gives new life and produces a new reality characterised by developed conformity to the royal law of love. Paul's ethics within the context of his training as a Pharisee, which schooled him in the rigid demands of the law, was transformed by his union with Jesus Christ, who fulfilled the law by his death and the power of the Holy Spirit. Consequently, when the Spirit is present, the new life becomes the beginning of salvation and is characterised as a blessing of a new age. This is what Paul's Christocentric ethics of love is all about: Spirit-driven, love-focused, new creation-based, and eschatologically oriented. This article examined Paul's love ethics under five theological principles that influenced his philosophy. The article further viewed Paul's love ethics from the perspectives of early Christians such as Augustine, Aquinas, Chrysostom, and Luther. Further contemporary thoughts were attempted before the discussion snowballed to issues of racial, social, and economic justice as well as cohesion. The article concluded with lessons showing that with love rightly ordered (*Ordo amoris*), humans can coexist in society.

Keywords: ethics; ordered love; disordered love; parousia; social justice; social cohesion; early Christianity

UNISA   Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Journal of Early Christian History
www.tandfonline.com/RECH
Volume 15 | Number 3 | 2025 | pp. 55–78

<https://doi.org/10.1080/2222582X.2026.2619717>
ISSN 2471-4054 (Online), ISSN 2222-582X (Print)
© The Author(s) 2026



Co-published by Unisa Press and Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

Introduction

James Orr holds that the chief business of ethics is to define man's supreme good.¹ He argues that according to the New Testament, a person's highest aims are to fulfil God's will and become more like Christ.² Such aims engender a connection with God and humankind in its entirety. This is the conjoined representation of the moral-ethical ideal, as explained by Christ's "Kingdom of God" teachings. Additionally, its application is seen in the perfect life that is viewed as the ideal standard, and its progressive realisation in the lives of those living the new life in Christ.

Paul asserts that he is a student of Christ's doctrine and a teacher of his ways.³ Consequently, beneath the surface and in their everyday application, Paul's teachings agree with the Sermon on the Mount, and the goal is to teach and present adherents to be perfect before God. Eisenbaum mirrors this argument in a paper titled "The Ethics of Paul." He also speaks of Christian ethics in terms of renewal in the Spirit and the resurrection to life everlasting.⁴ Cho asserts that there is no dissent among scholars that Paul's ethics is based on the Spirit and the commonly evident ethical standard, which is love.⁵ Further, Paul addresses ethical matters on the cross and the consummation of the parousia (the second coming of Christ), in several writings. His teaching focuses on how Christians should behave and think in light of their salvation from the works of death or sin, especially in practising self-sacrificial love and longing for the eschatological transformation of the world.

However, there is a contrast between Paul's teaching in early Christian history and contemporary society, namely the ongoing problem of a lack of love in the daily interaction of humans. Consequently, neoliberalism and its related antics in human society, fuelled by selfishness and self-centeredness, are dominant cultures. This article examines issues of social justice, social cohesion, and how with love humans can coexist in society. While this article focuses on Africa, the issues are both local and global. For example, several issues in South Africa evident in the media and related space show how social and economic imbalances open doors for several scenarios of injustice.⁶ On the premise of these social and economic injustices, inclusion is heralded as the solution

1 James Orr, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Albany, OR: Ages Software, 1999).

2 See 2 Cor 3:18.

3 Orr, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*.

4 Pamela Michelle Eisenbaum, *Paul Was Not a Christian: The Original Message of a Misunderstood Apostle* (New York: Harperone, 2009).

5 Youngmo Cho, *Spirit and Kingdom in the Writings of Luke and Paul: An Attempt to Reconcile These Concepts* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2007), 99.

6 Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, "Rift between Rich and Poor," accessed August 2022, www.bmz.de/en/countries/south-africa/social-situation-49434. Also see ActionSA, "Social Justice," *ActionSA*, accessed September 16, 2020, www.actionsa.org.za/social-justice/.

by a Harvard report.⁷ However, these suggestions may be difficult to achieve unless love is envisioned and practised. Additionally, Homrighausen, presents a long-standing hatred between the churches of South Africa.⁸ Bailie highlights the prevalence of racial and political differences which shortchanged the people of South Africa. In his opinion, the country is run in such a way that one group (either political or racial) comes first and “to hell with the rest.”⁹ Tastard calls it a “spiritual crisis in South Africa today.”¹⁰

At the international level, speaking about the implication of a hatred-led war between Russia and Ukraine, An-Nahar submits that laws or regulations are being broken, and military offensives are creating mental invasion, cultural marginalisation, and intellectual subjugation.¹¹ While hatred pervades the atmosphere, the inspirational love story of Andrii Smolensky who met Alina amid war is a sign that intentionality and love can overturn hatred and war.¹² Correspondingly, the crisis in Gaza and Israel shows how our world is fast becoming a habitation of hatred, injustice, and a lack of tolerance to coexistence.¹³ Conversely, the story of Abulhawa shows it is indeed possible to express love during war and better still change the narrative over time.¹⁴

The solution to the problems presented above can be addressed by the embodiment of the life and example of Jesus Christ which lies in the new birth experience through the power of the Holy Spirit. This new birth is made possible by Christ’s death and resurrection which removes sin and guilt, thus reconciling man with God. The creative power of the Holy Spirit works through the crucified and risen Christ to give the believer

7 Ricardo Hausmann et al., “Growth through Inclusion in South Africa,” accessed August 1, 2025, <https://growthlab.hks.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/2023-11-cid-wp-434-south-africa-growth-through-inclusion.pdf>.

8 Elmer Homrighausen, “Crisis in the Churches of South Africa,” *Theology Today* 24, no. 1 (1967): 64–74.

9 Craig Bailie, “Christianity and Politics: Has the South African Church Negated Its Responsibility?” *News24*, 2 April 2019, www.news24.com/News24/christianity-and-politics-has-the-church-negated-its-responsibility-20190402.

10 Terry Tastard, “Christianity & Crisis in South Africa Today,” Providence, 28 February 2017, providencemag.com/2017/02/christianity-crisis-in-south-africa-today/.

11 Lebanon An-Nahar, “Ukraine between War and Love,” *The Media Line*, 20 March 2023, themedialine.org/mideast-mindset/ukraine-between-war-and-love/. See also Centre for Preventive Action, “War in Ukraine,” Global Conflict Tracker, accessed August 1, 2025, www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/conflict-ukraine.

12 Natalie Keyssar, “Stories of Love and Loss in the Shadow of Ukraine’s War,” *The Washington Post*, February 14, 2024, www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/02/14/ukraine-love-stories-photos/. See also Vitaly Shevchenko, “Ukraine War: Mental Health Crisis Grows in Shattered Country,” *BBC News*, September 20, 2024, www.bbc.com/news/articles/c20mn1z3vm6o.

13 United Nations, “Amid Increasingly Dire Humanitarian Situation in Gaza, Secretary-General Tells Security Council Hamas Attacks Cannot Justify Collective Punishment of Palestinian People,” *UN Press*, October 24, 2023, <https://press.un.org/en/2023/sc15462.doc.htm>. See also Amir Sommer, “I am Half Israeli and Half Palestinian. This War Feels as If It’s Killing Me Twice,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 7, 2024, www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2024-01-07/israel-palestine-gaza-war.

14 Susan Abulhawa, “Love in the Time of Genocide,” *Al Jazeera*, March 12, 2024, www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2024/3/12/love-in-the-time-of-genocide.

a new life, an elevated, harmonious, and complete existence. In response to this act of God, Paul urges Christians to “put to death the deeds of the body” or dead works through love and obedience to God’s will. Paul views ethical behaviour as a result of a new spiritual life and calls Christians to walk worthy of their calling and to shun the desires of the flesh. He often speaks of human behaviour in terms of pleasing and honouring God.¹⁵ Paul urged people in his day and by extension contemporary Christians to live in righteousness, holiness, and faithfulness. What Cho makes evident is that in the believer’s present life, there is an eschatological orientation between the already and the not yet; the believer lives in the new age, but also remains in the fallen Adamic nature.¹⁶ This human condition is worth understanding in the context of the implications of Paul’s ethics of this love. It is within this context that Paul then advised the expression of love as an ethical concept using five theological concepts to advise the early Christians.

To discuss Paul’s argument and apply the same in contemporary times, the next sections present an overview of his influence and legacy and the five theological concepts that influenced Paul’s philosophical framework of love as a christological pattern. Subsequently, the view of Paul’s ethics under love, mercy, and justice are discussed through the lens of early Christian history and the contemporary implications. In the end, it should be clear how such ethics of love can improve the culture of love and coexistence in South Africa and beyond.

Overview of Paul’s Influence and Legacy

According to John Walvoord and Roy Zuck, Paul was “born in Tarsus of Cilicia in the first half of the first century A.D.”¹⁷ His father was a Jewish tentmaker who had been educated in the law of Moses under the instruction of Gamaliel.¹⁸ While on the road to Damascus to persecute the Christians, Paul encountered Jesus, which led to a radical conversion. The experience was impactful in his life and the lives of many subsequent believers.¹⁹ He gained profound respect and prominence within the Christian churches he founded throughout the Roman Empire and, by extension, among the gentiles²⁰

Paul’s influence and theological legacy cannot be denied. They have been instrumental in shaping the Christian tradition. His life, mission, and writings have all impacted the legacy of Christianity, the development of Christian theology, and the expansion of the Christian Church.²¹ The influence of his letters is also evident in liturgy, specifically those used during the Eucharist. These liturgies often include passages like 1 Cor 11:23–

15 See 1 Cor 4:14–5:10; 1 Thess 4:1–12.

16 Cho, *Spirit and Kingdom in the Writings of Luke and Paul*, 99.

17 John Walvoord and Roy Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old and New Testament* (Colorado Springs, CO: Victor Books, 1983).

18 See Acts 22:3.

19 See Acts 9; 26.

20 Walvoord and Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*.

21 Eisenbaum, *Paul Was Not a Christian*.

26, which describe the events leading up to the Last Supper.²² Little wonder some of his words were adopted almost verbatim in some liturgical prayers.²³ Aside from developing the field of Christian theology, Paul's writings served as a foundational source of ethics and morality for Christians throughout history to live a just and righteous life.

Paul's legacy has extended beyond the theological realm. Paul is credited with introducing the idea of the equality of all believers, regardless of gender, financial status, social standing, or ethnicity. He set forth a new model of kinship, in which all are equal in the eyes of God and all believers are brothers and sisters in Christ. Paul also encourages all to follow the "higher path" of peace, love, and spiritual growth rather than the "lower path" of greed, power, and violence. This influence is as significant now as it was during his lifetime in shaping the thought and practice of Christians around the world, and throughout the centuries, making him one of the most influential figures in the history of Christianity.

Theological Concepts that Influenced Paul's Philosophical Framework of Love

In developing love ethics that encompass social, moral, and spiritual dimensions, Paul presents some theological insights. This article presents and discusses five such insights in the subsections below. However, we do not claim that these five points represent the entirety of Paul's theology of love ethics. More can be discovered by subsequent research.

Soteriological Ethics

Paul's moral teaching, which is the core of his 13 letters, is known as a soteriological ethic. In Rom 1:16, Paul calls the gospel "the power of God unto salvation." Paul's perspective challenges each person to hear the gospel, believe it, and live by it. Other texts, such as Rom 14 and 1 Cor 8, deal with ethnic communities and coexistence, especially between the Jews and the gentiles. Paul subscribed to the love of Christ, established in the gift of salvation, to the love of one's neighbour as oneself, and peaceful coexistence.²⁴

Such social action encouraged by Paul was rooted in the expression of soteriological experience in the human environment. Paul based this argument on God's work in Christ, believing that God has granted redemption. From this redemption, Christians are

22 Calvin Lane, "Book Review: The Rise and Fall of the Incomparable Liturgy: The Book of Common Prayer, 1559–1906," *Anglican Theological Review* 100, no. 4 (2018): 852–853, <https://doi.org/10.1177/000332861810000437>.

23 Lane, "Book Review: The Rise and Fall of the Incomparable Liturgy," 853.

24 Stephen Mittwede, "The Relationship between Paul's Soteriology and His Ethics," *Affinity*, accessed 2 August 2022, www.affinity.org.uk/foundations/issue-62/issue-62-article-1-the-relationship-between-pauls-soteriology-and-his-ethics/.

blessed to live in a certain manner because they have justification, reconciliation, and sanctification. They are new creations in Christ, they died to sin, and have been empowered by the Spirit of God. All these factors enable believers to lead godly and righteous lives. Ultimately, it is only through God's grace that we can live according to his will.²⁵ Thus, in the history of Christianity, love is central to coexistence and related social interactions.

Pneumatological Ethics

Among others, texts like Rom 8, Rom 12, Gal 5, 1 Cor 2, and 1 Cor 12 emphasise the Spirit in Paul's pneumatological ethics. The Spirit plays a key role in ethical living. The Holy Spirit allows Christians to be transformed from the fleshly realm to the spiritual realm and to live according to his will. The election, the Spirit and moral life are mutually interconnected as God calls Christians to be sanctified and to use the Spirit's teaching to love each other. Through the Spirit, Christians can make moral choices that lead to holiness and godliness. Although the Spirit does not take away humans' responsibility for their actions, it encourages Christians to use their moral authority and make choices that adhere to God's will. Paul makes this point in 1 Thess 4:9 when he says that they have been taught to love one another by the Spirit and must crucify the passions and desires of the flesh to live holy and godly lives. In Gal 5:24, Paul presents the Spirit as the moral compass and enabling guide which allows the justified to know and live in ways that are pleasing to God. Paul draws the same connections to the other churches he addresses, emphasising living lives that reflect God's moral values.²⁶ Thus, in the early church, living in peace and coexisting in love was ethical.

Sacramental Ethics

The Pauline understanding of baptism and the Eucharist highlights the link between salvation and the moral imperative. Participation in these sacraments brings Christians into the sphere of God's grace and empowers them to live by this newness of life enjoyed in Christ. Paul's occasional remarks regarding these sacraments, such as those found in 1 Corinthians, connect the sacrament and one's moral obligations. For example, through baptism, believers are washed of their sins, sanctified, and justified so that we may live a new life—free from the power of sin—in obedience to God's commandments.²⁷ Paul's remarks about the Corinthians' baptism and Eucharist indicate that these sacraments involve more than a magical prophylactic against sin: they are acts of commitment that include being part of the body of Christ and sanctified by the Spirit. The experience of Israel in the wilderness highlights that the communion established by participation in these sacraments requires total commitment, just as one is not allowed to drink from the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons.²⁸ Therefore, those who partake

25 Gene L. Green, "Rediscovering Paul: An Introduction to His World, Letters and Theology," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 19, no. 3 (2009): 444–446, <https://doi.org/10.2307/26424234>.

26 Matera and Sampley, *Encountering Paul*, 162–164.

27 See 1 Cor 6:11.

28 See 1 Cor 10:21.

in these sacraments should live differently, live in a newness of life and be pleasing to God.²⁹

Self-Sacrificial Love Ethics

Paul grounds his understanding of God's love via Jesus's self-sacrificing love. Drawing on God's redemptive plan, Paul teaches Christians to manifest love daily. The source of this love is God's mercy and grace, and God even pours it into the believers' hearts through the power of the Holy Spirit. Paul emphasises the love of Christ as paramount and that it should be the model for believers when interacting with fellow humankind.

To validate this argument, Paul conducts his life selflessly and sincerely to mirror God's love for him in Christ. He writes of his "genuine love" in 2 Cor 6:6 and consistently affirms it throughout his letters, seeking to express such love through gentleness, understanding and compassion. He does not demand any sort of recognition or reward for loving anyone, but he does so to walk in the footsteps of Christ. Therefore, in his opinion, everyone must feel, understand, and express this love to others. Paul not only expressed his love for his converts but also emphasised the importance of abiding by God's commands.³⁰ Further, Paul exhorts all to emulate and reflect God's love, which he earlier experienced in Christ. He encourages all and sundry to stand firm in the Lord and strive to express God's love through acts of compassion and gentle interactions with one another and cultivate a community characterised by love. Through his writings, Paul seeks to remind everyone that just as Christ loved all and gave himself for all, all humankind, especially Christians, must do likewise.³¹

Paul conveys that such love is not an emotion or feeling but an unceasing, everyday effort. Love involves sacrificing in the same way Jesus did. It involves humankind devoting themselves to one another in mutual love and kindness and prioritising the needs of their neighbour.³² In a contemporary sense, applying Paul's notion of love to social cohesion and social justice means valuing others and working to create a society where all people are treated with respect and kindness. Humankind must strive to provide for the needs of neighbours and community first, regardless of religion, race, or gender.

Eschatological Ethics and Parousia Consummation

Paul encourages believers to live considering their Lord's imminent return and the general resurrection of the dead at the end of the ages. He calls Christians to remain sober and aware and to put on the breastplate of faith and love (1 Thess 5:8) and the helmet of hope of salvation (Eph 6:17). Thus, believers must seek to be blameless at Christ's coming, on the day of judgment when all will appear before God's judgment

29 Matera and Sampley, *Encountering Paul*, 170–171.

30 Matera and Sampley, *Encountering Paul*, 176–178.

31 Matera and Sampley, *Encountering Paul*, 178–179.

32 Matera and Sampley, *Encountering Paul*, 179.

seat. Paul expresses confidence that on that day, a crown of righteousness will be bestowed on those who have longed for the appearance of the Lord.

In this ethic, Paul calls for the expression of love overflowing with knowledge and insight, denoting a deep understanding of the implications of living according to God's standards for love, faith, and hope. This call starts with having knowledge and insight into how the love of God can help us deal with the challenges of this life and prepare us for Christ's appearance.³³ By extension, it teaches humankind to express love, faith, and hope in communal relationships.

One could not agree more with Ohlheiser, who succinctly interprets the expression of such love and faith as that which invites humans into the mutuality at the heart of all good relationships and that Paul's idea of armour does not represent a barrier, as it may appear, but a bridge connecting humankind and all people to God.³⁴ Thus, Paul's eschatological view seems to place a responsibility of contributing to peaceful and loving coexistence as part of the requirements for reigning with Christ at the parousia.

Context of Paul's Teachings on Ethics: Love, Mercy, and Justice

Paul's ethical teachings were rooted in both the Old and New Testament scriptures, with his context heavily informed by the social and cultural values of the Roman Empire. He drew heavily on the Mosaic law, which had been given to Moses by God on Mount Sinai and is laid out in the book of Leviticus.³⁵ In this law, God reveals to Moses his plan for a just and equitable society, teaching principles of justice and mercy that informed much of Paul's ethical writings.³⁶ Additionally, the Greco-Roman culture in which Paul lived had its own set of ethical values, such as stoicism and cynicism, which heavily influenced Paul's theology.³⁷ He learnt from Jesus's life and teachings, immersed in his supremely ethical example, and the wisdom found in the processes of the early church.³⁸

With this context in mind, Paul's ethical writings were critical components of the New Testament. Should one compare the ethics of Jesus and Paul? Eisenbaum reasons that Jesus and Paul's concept of ethics had much in common. Both emphasise character and the idea of an inner transformation of the individual, faith and the need for inward purity, the fulfilment of duties to fellow human beings, and the importance of loving one's

33 Madera and Sampley, *Encountering Paul*, 181–182.

34 Abby Ohlheiser, "The Woman behind 'Me Too' Knew the Power of the Phrase When She Created It — 10 Years Ago," *The Washington Post*, October 19, 2017, www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2017/10/19/the-woman-behind-me-too-knew-the-power-of-the-phrase-when-she-created-it-10-years-ago/.

35 Saul M. Olyan, *Moral Vision in the Hebrew Bible* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2011).

36 John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible* (Ada, MI: Baker Academic, 2018).

37 Olyan, *Moral Vision in the Hebrew Bible*.

38 Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament*.

neighbour as oneself.³⁹ Moreover, the ultimate end of life espoused by both Jesus and Paul is the establishment of a redeemed humanity in what Christ referred to as the kingdom of God. Paul likewise symbolises this by stressing the importance of attaining perfection in the risen Jesus Christ, thus emphasising the need to grow in all things unto him who is the head and to present every human being perfect before God.⁴⁰ Paul combines absolutist and situational ethics depending on the ethical content of the issue.

In 1 Cor 7:1–11:1, Paul legitimises some form of “situational ethics” in which moral principles take precedence over situational variables. In his situational ethics, Paul encourages dialogue, negotiation, and consideration of varied case studies and scenarios. His approach is further strengthened by pastoral judgment and sensitivity to variations between different cases.⁴¹

Lastly, Paul believes that the Holy Spirit gives power and strength to those who believe in God and guides their ethical attitudes and behaviour. He taught that faith should be expressed in love towards God and all his Creation, including fellow humans. Paul also taught that the law of love should be the rule of life, and it should be applied mainly to the weakest and most vulnerable members of society. Against this background, the following two subsections focus on Paul’s teachings on love, mercy, and justice.

Love

According to Toew, Paul’s ethical system is dominated by love as an essential cornerstone, a basic cornerstone that is better than all other laws.⁴² Luther (quoted in Schlatter) holds that Paul’s ethical system is heavily built upon love.⁴³ This love is defined as being “the most excellent way” in 1 Corinthians 12:31) and surpassing all other commandments while being the fulfilment of the law and an essential foundation for all other ethical values.⁴⁴ Paul states that without love, there cannot be a Christian life—love is indispensable and fundamental. Paul’s guidelines for love involve wanting the best for others, which includes displaying kindness, expressing service, and providing unconditional acceptance. Self-love and neighbourly love can both be encompassed in this definition.⁴⁵ Jesus also encouraged all humans to love others as themselves.⁴⁶ In this, we find Plato’s definition in the *Symposium*, which asserts that love is the desire for the good of the other.⁴⁷ According to Paul, love is a gracious and

39 Eisenbaum, *Paul Was Not a Christian*.

40 Galatians 5:13–16; Eph 4:15.

41 Anthony Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 380–382.

42 John Toew, *Romans* (Herald Press [online], 2004), 308.

43 Adolf Schlatter, *The Theology of the Apostles: The Development of New Testament Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999).

44 See Rom 13:10

45 Schlatter, *The Theology of the Apostles*.

46 John 15:12.

47 Plato, *Plato’s Symposium* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

selfless act that comes from God’s grace and leads to deeds of mercy and sacrifice.⁴⁸ As Jesus set the example, the importance of love is the basis for moral behaviour in Paul’s ethical organism.⁴⁹

Regarding the history of the church, the apostles demonstrated Jesus’s love character socially. Jesus demonstrated love not just by preaching to the crowd but by prioritising their welfare. This is evidence of love expressed in social and community support. The apostles did the same in Acts 2:40–47, as did Paul in 1 Cor 13. By implication, Paul’s ethical system embedded in love is both historical and practical.

Justice and Mercy

Paul stresses the importance of justice and mercy, following the Mosaic law as applied in the Christian community.⁵⁰ Individuals should live up to the law, respect authorities, and display justice through charity, good deeds, and care for the needy.⁵¹ God’s justice and mercy should be accessible to everyone, as signified by the sceptre of God’s kingdom.⁵² Thus, justice and mercy should be practised equitably.

According to Paul, acts of mercy and kindness are essential to demonstrate God’s goodness, emphasising that one must be merciful to receive mercy.⁵³ This includes ideas such as forgiving debts.⁵⁴ All people are entitled to justice in the form of mercy and kindness, no matter their abilities or background.⁵⁵ Paul argues that justice and mercy must be balanced and practiced without exception. He maintains that believers must do acts of charity, hold themselves accountable for their behaviour, and be forgiving.

Paul’s position is common in early Christian history. According to Konstan, forgiveness leading to debt cancellation was a virtue very much in vogue. The author leverages Matt 6:12 in the Sermon on the Mount to claim that foregoing debts does not imply that the debtor has wronged the creditor, although that would be the case if the debtor intentionally refuses to repay the loan, or otherwise attempts to cheat the lender.⁵⁶ Atwater juxtaposes the Old and New Testaments and suggests that from Bible history, showing mercy and forgiving debts remain part of the system of overhauling the economy.⁵⁷ Thus, during the Jubilee, there was a release for those enslaved by debts.

48 Schlatter, *The Theology of the Apostles*. Also see Rom 12:9–13; John 15:12–13; 2 Cor 5:14–15.

49 See Rom 13:12–14.

50 Schlatter, *The Theology of the Apostles*.

51 See Rom 13:17; Gal 6:10.

52 See Isa 11:3–5.

53 See Rom 11:30–32.

54 See Acts 20:35.

55 Ephesians 4:32.

56 David Konstan, “Before Forgiveness: Classical Antiquity, Early Christianity,” *Classical Journal* 38 (2011): 91–109.

57 Tim Atwater, “Debt Cancellation: Biblical Norm, Not Exception,” *Jubilee USA Network*, n.d. Accessed July 23, 2025, <https://www.jubileeusa.org/faith/faith-and-worship-resources/debt-cancellation-a-biblical-norm.html>.

During the Jubilee, a sabbath rest for the land and people was declared, and consequently the redistribution of lands lost because of debt (collateral) and the reordering of prices for land and labour were activated.⁵⁸

Such action, Atwater further claims, is not just an economic transaction, but spiritual. Jesus himself, being Paul's perfect example, linked forgiveness of money and spiritual debts.⁵⁹ Likewise, Jesus made forgiveness of debts contingent on forgiveness of the debts of others.⁶⁰ In the same vein, the early Christians applied debt cancellation literally and spiritually.⁶¹ In contemporary times, such forgiveness of debts is extendable to impoverished nations because both the Torah and the New Testament present such a model for Israel, a model extendable to all the nations.⁶²

Paul's Teachings on Neighbourly Love

Paul calls on Christians to love one another in Rom 13:8–10, stating that it is the second greatest commandment and asserting, "Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another."⁶³ Galatians 5:14 identifies this concept as the "law of Christ." Furthermore, Paul instructs believers to "clothe themselves with the Lord Jesus Christ" and "not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh."⁶⁴ To love one's neighbour, Paul writes in Romans 12:9–21, is to demonstrate sincere affection, think positively, give honour and avoid anger, and be generous and free of bitterness. Further, Eph 4:29–32 exhorts Christians to watch their words, contain their anger, and be generous in giving. Paul calls on followers of Christ to be kind and respectful to one another—to accept one another, just as Christ did—and to bear each other's burdens, as Christ commanded in Rom 15:7 and 1 Cor 6:2. In doing so, they will fulfil the law of Christ. Paul provides direction on how to do so, such as looking for the good in others, being patient and forgiving, and being kind and generous. Following Paul's teachings can help Christians to love their neighbours unconditionally, as God desires.

However, knowing which acts are ethical and morally permissible with regard to loving one's neighbours can be difficult, as philosophical ethical systems have their own criteria for distinguishing between good and bad. Feinberg and Feinberg present six ethical systems used.⁶⁵ The first is utilitarianism, a consequentialist idea that the morality of any action should be judged based on the greatest good achieved by the

58 See Lev 25:14–16, 26–27, 50–52.

59 Atwater, "Debt Cancellation." Also see Luke 7:36–50; 11:2–4; 16:1–13.

60 See Matt 6:9–15; 18:21–35.

61 See Luke 16:1–13; Acts 2:43–46; 4:32–37.

62 See Gen 12:2–3; Exod 4:23; Acts 3:25–26.

63 Romans 13:8–10.

64 Romans 13:14.

65 John Feinberg and Paul Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1993), 20–22.

action, meaning that the consequences of an action determine its moral status.⁶⁶ The second is teleological theory, which asserts that morality is based on the non-moral values produced when an act is performed. Depending on the kind of teleological theory, one is either looking to produce the greatest good for oneself (ethical egoism) or the greatest good for the greatest number (ethical universalism).⁶⁷

The third is deontological ethics, which implies that an action is judged based on its adherence to certain moral rules. It rejects the idea of evaluating an action based on its consequences, and instead focuses on the moral duties and obligations of an action. This system is primarily concerned with the motive behind an action, rather than its results or its effects on the people involved.⁶⁸ The fourth is virtue ethics, which focuses on the qualities and character of a person rather than any decision. It emphasises the importance of virtues, such as honesty, justice, and courage, as the foundations for a moral life.⁶⁹

The fifth is the divine command theory that states that morality is determined by a deity, and the moral action must be by the will of this deity. This system can be both deontological, in that it focuses on following moral rules and duties, and consequentialist, in that it is concerned with the consequences of an action.⁷⁰ The sixth is mixed theories, which balances deontological and teleological considerations. It suggests that there are two fundamental principles of moral obligation—benevolence and justice, with their associated principles such as utility, non-interference, and equal treatment under the law. Therefore, moral rules should be determined by understanding which rules best fulfil these requirements of utility and justice.⁷¹

Although the philosophical concepts of ethics are not the focus of this paper, it was important to briefly analyse them to make a critical point that each of these ethical systems has its strengths and weaknesses, and none of them offers an absolute answer to every moral dilemma. They can, however, help guide people's moral judgement and provide an intellectual framework for understanding the nuances of ethics. From a Christian perspective, Paul's ethical love contemplation may likely provide a better ecosystem where socio-economic justice and peaceful coexistence can thrive.

Early Christians' Views and Acceptance of Paul's Love Ethics: Augustine, Aquinas, Chrysostom, and Luther

The previous section discussed Paul's theological concepts of love. However, historical or early Christian interpretations and perceptions of Paul's love are imperative to align

66 Feinberg and Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World*, 20.

67 Feinberg and Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World*, 20–21.

68 Feinberg and Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World*, 21.

69 Feinberg and Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World*, 22.

70 Feinberg and Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World*, 22.

71 Feinberg and Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World*, 22.

with the scope of the journal. Four early Christians from various time periods are discussed in this section, namely Augustine, Aquinas, Chrysostom, and Luther.

Augustine

Augustinian ethics focuses on love, which is closely related to virtue and repeatedly used synonymously with “will or intention.” Augustine explains his love ethics from the biblical command to love both God and neighbour (Matt 22:37, 39). Augustine attempts throughout his life to interpret this idea in terms of Platonic erotic love.⁷² He claims that “love is a force in our souls that attracts us to the true beauty we find nowhere else but in and above ourselves; it drives us to ascend from the sensible to the intelligible world and the cognition and contemplation of God.”⁷³ Augustine held that love cannot just be practice without being “rightly ordered”; this is the only way it can align with God’s purpose.⁷⁴ Augustine distinguishes two kinds of love: *caritas* (divine love) and *cupiditas* (disordered love). He argues that a disordered love is a lesser love, a result of humans loving lesser things more than they love God.⁷⁵ In this hierarchy of the order of love, God is first. Thus, man’s way of expressing love should reflect God’s way of love. This is reflected in his description of the city of God as he claims that the earthly city should reflect the heavenly city’s universal charity.⁷⁶

Further, Augustine saw the tension between the dual Christian motivations of love of God and neighbour versus reward and punishment in the afterlife.⁷⁷ He insisted that keeping moral law through fear of punishment is not keeping the law at all. Likewise, expressing ordinary human love is not sufficient as a motivation for acceptable Christian living. All humans bear the burden of Adamic or original sin; therefore, they are incapable of redeeming themselves by their efforts or human love. Rightly so, only God’s unmerited grace made possible by obedience to his commandment of love can help humans fulfil moral law. In other words, humans are incapable of loving or acting in love without God’s grace. Augustine’s view came from a divine ontology which sees God as perfect, extremely simple, timeless, immutable, self-sufficient, and impassible.⁷⁸

72 Christian Tornau, “Saint Augustine,” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2024/entries/augustine/>.

73 Tornau, “Saint Augustine.”

74 David P. Cassidy, “Augustine, Aquinas, the Veep, and the Ordo Amoris,” David P. Cassidy (blog), February 10, 2025, <https://www.davidpcassidy.com/blog/thomas-aquinas-and-the-or-do-amoris-a-response-to-jd-vances-interpretation>.

75 Cassidy, “Augustine, Aquinas, the Veep, and the *Ordo Amoris*.”

cf. Aurelius Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, ed. and trans. R. P. H. Green (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 27–29.

76 Aurelius Augustine, *The City of God*, ed. and trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin Books, 2003).

77 Peter Singer, “Ethics | Definition, History, Examples, Types, Philosophy, & Facts,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, July 20, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/ethics-philosophy/St-Augustine>.

78 John Peckham, “Ethics of Love? Morality and the Meaning of Divine Love,” *Andrews University Seminary Student Journal* 2, no. 1 (2016): 3, accessed 2 September 2024, <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1019&context=aussj>.

In the final analysis, Augustine views God's divine love as not affected by its object, and human love is in no way advantageous to God. Therefore, God does love humans, not based on merit, but from pure beneficence.

Aquinas

Thomas Aquinas adopts a similar perfect being ontology, including the notion that God is utterly impassible, and thus divine love cannot be affected. In other words, God loves, but it is a passionless love, and an "act of the will ... As such, divine love is nothing more or less than a purposive, rational act of God's will."⁷⁹ Such an act of the will is directed by reason to reflect the heavenly city's universal charity, just as Augustine insists in *The City of God*.⁸⁰ But more recently, scholars such as McNerny have warned against misappropriating the reflection of love in the political sphere with the notion that love should start and end with oneself, especially for political reasons. Love should be rightly ordered, just as Augustine argued, and it should begin with the immediate (oneself) and radiate outward in an ever-expanding circle of responsibility.⁸¹ This position is consistent with scriptures and Christian social teaching, which encourages one to uphold subsidiarity (local responsibility or love of oneself) and solidarity (universal moral responsibility to love neighbours). Thus, the Christian responsibility of love should be within and beyond the "family of faith" as presented in Gal 6:9–10. The implication then is that Christians' responsibility and priority to care supremely for the "family of faith" does not exclude the care for others. This concept of love expression beyond self is based on the two Thomistic principles of love, which are the "universal destination of goods" and "the common good as transcendent."⁸²

Luther

Luther, like Augustine and Aquinas, also affirms the value of love but with a different nuance on the impassibility of the cross (*theologia crucis*)⁸³ notwithstanding, he did not sustain the idea that "God is not capable of suffering."⁸⁴ Dennis Ngien follows up this argument by theorising that Luther's theology requires divine passibility. In other words, the suffering of God ascribes to Christ's divinity what happens to humanity and vice versa.⁸⁵ For Luther, divine passibility is limited to God in Christ, but does not reach God in Godself.⁸⁶ In other words, God's gratuitous love (*agape*) should be differentiated

79 Peckham, "Ethics of Love?," 3.

80 Augustine, *The City of God*.

81 Ralph McNerny, *Ethics and Politics: Selected Essays* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2001).

82 McNerny, *Ethics and Politics*.

83 Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, ed. Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1999), 37:210.

84 Dennis Ngien, *The Suffering of God According to Martin Luther's "Theologia Crucis"* (Lausanne: Peter Lang, 1995), 181.

85 Ngien, *The Suffering of God*; Luther, *Luther's Works*, 37:210.

86 Cf. Alister E. McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross: Martin Luther's Theological Breakthrough* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985).

from all human types of love because God’s love flows forth and bestows good.⁸⁷ Consequently, “sinners are attractive because they are loved; they are not loved because they are attractive.”⁸⁸ God receives nothing from humans but rather liberally gives out of his extravagant goodness.

Where Augustine, Aquinas, and Luther Differ

An overview of the three thoughts of Augustine, Aquinas, and Luther shows striking agreements; however, there are sharp disagreements on the matter of human love. In Augustine’s opinion, humans could love God as their only true object of love. As such, the quality of love humans can offer, or practice, is dependent on its object (God). Although this love is itself a gift of God, “humans ought to desire God as the ultimate object of goodness and in this way truly love Him.”⁸⁹ Moving forward to Aquinas, there is an obvious similarity with Augustine; a possibility of expressing true human love for God and others, including the possibility of friendship with God.⁹⁰ Additionally, Aquinas held that love is always directed towards some good (*amor concupiscentiae*), willed toward someone (*amor amicitiae*), whether oneself or another. But Luther contrasted sharply with Augustine and Aquinas with the assertion that it is utterly impossible for humans to love God because of intrinsic sinfulness; humans are ontologically incapable of love.⁹¹ However, humans may only love God by admitting a total inability to love God.⁹² As far as Luther is concerned, no one can love God with their whole heart, nor can people love a neighbour like themselves.⁹³ Thus, all true love flows downwards; there is no such thing as love that flows upwards towards God.⁹⁴

Chrysostom

Chrysostom seems to dig deeper into the heart of Paul, who turns to speak of love to soften the harshness of his rebuke to the Corinthians (2 Cor 7:2). For Paul, using the words “Open your hearts to us” is a language of love. By referring to Paul’s statements such as “I am filled with consolation” (2 Cor 7:3–4) and “Titus came, telling us of your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me, as bearing the witness of love” (2 Cor 7:7), Chrysostom further asserts that there are more pieces of evidence in Paul’s writing suggesting a wonderful love. These include Rom 1:11, Gal 4:19, Eph 3:14, and 2 Thess 2:19. On these scriptural accounts, Chrysostom asserts, “There was nothing more capacious than the heart of Paul, for he loved all the faithful with as intimate a love as

87 Cf. Daniel Day Williams. *The Spirit and the Forms of Love* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 78.

88 Peckham, “Ethics of Love?,” 3.

89 Peckham, “Ethics of Love?,” 5.

90 Peckham, “Ethics of Love?,” 6

91 Peckham, “Ethics of Love?,” 6

92 Irving Singer, *The Nature of Love* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009), 1:327.

93 Luther, *Luther’s Works*, 37:309.

94 Peckham, “Ethics of Love?,” 6

any lover could have for a loved one, his love not being divided and lessened but remaining whole for each of them.”⁹⁵

Furthermore, Bozinis (2024) discusses Chrysostom’s understanding of the motif of the two cities of Augustine as an attempt in a homily to give theoretical justification for his position concerning God’s providence in the world. Using the allegory of the two cities to describe the city of the rich and the poor, Chrysostom submits that harsh realities of life do not support humans’ ability to love as Paul expresses in various scriptures. Using the motif of the two cities, Chrysostom argues that “the violent confrontation between the ambitions of various groups and their economic interests drains the human soul of the last drop of love it has.”⁹⁶ For him, an abyss separates the rich from the poor, whether they live side by side in the same city or not. The city has been divided into “the city of the rich” and the “city of the poor,” with uncrossable walls erected between the two.⁹⁷ This assertion then makes Paul’s language of love flowery but difficult to implement in reality. This assertion is not just about the rich and the poor in the city; it also covers the fact that even within the church, the love or passions which money awakens and the unequal distribution of wealth between population groups are evidence of how hard it is to express love ideally. While preaching, the critical question Chrysostom asked was: How can the existence of such great social inequalities be reconciled with the virtue of love?⁹⁸

To answer the question, Chrysostom suggests, “Let’s make two cities in our imagination, one consisting only of the rich and another only of the poor. And no poor person is allowed in the city of the rich, nor any rich person allowed in the city of the poor. But let us keep the cities completely pure in order to see which is more self-sufficient.”⁹⁹ In the city of the rich, Chrysostom continues, “there are no craftsmen, builders, cobblers, bakers, farmers, carpenters, blacksmiths, tentmakers—none of these people are present. How could such a city possibly continue to exist?”¹⁰⁰ Although it can be argued that the rich could easily give money to pay for the services of the poor, whatever they need, Chrysostom argues that trying to purchase what they lack still speaks of insufficiency. He then asked:

Are they really self-sufficient if they have such a need? And how will they build their houses? Will they go and buy them from the poor? That is impossible. They would have to call craftsmen to their city and in doing so violate the law which we instituted in the beginning when we founded their city. We should remember of course what we said that

95 “Paul’s Love for His Flock – John Chrysostom,” Crossroads Initiative, February 5, 2016, <https://www.crossroadsinitiative.com/media/articles/pauls-love-for-his-flock-john-chrysostom/>.

96 Constantine A. Bozinis, “Civic Love: A New Approach to John Chrysostom,” accessed 2 August 2025, https://chrysostom.hypotheses.org/files/2024/08/Civic-Love_Constantine-A.-Bozinis.pdf.

97 Cf. Plato’s description of the oligarchic regime in *Resp.* VIII, 551d.

98 Bozinis, “Civic Love,” 7.

99 Bozinis, “Civic Love,” 8.

100 Bozinis, “Civic Love,” 8.

none of the poor are allowed to enter within the city of the rich. But now necessity, without our desiring it, required them to be allowed to pass.¹⁰¹

In the final analysis, Chrysostom asserts that no city can stand without the poor because “if a city cannot allow anyone of these to pass within its walls, there will be no more city, but rather it will collapse”¹⁰² By implication, Chrysostom wishes to establish that

even the existence of disparities between the social classes serves some higher purpose which has its origin in the divine. Despite the conflict of interests and the contempt with which the rich usually treat the poor, they are dependent on their services in order to live. If they ever decided to separate from them to found their own city, they would have to call on them “like some kind of saviours”. However great may be the riches they have stored up in their treasuries and warehouses, they cannot break this bond of necessity by which God has bound humanity together, in order to teach them love.¹⁰³

Attitude of the Modern Mind to Paul’s Ethical Teaching on Love

Certain submissions show that

the modern man finds it difficult to make vital to himself, as Paul seems to have done, the fact that his ethical life is a direct manifestation of the working in him of the Holy Spirit. Whatever his theological belief regarding the Holy Spirit, the relation of the Spirit to conduct is less real than appears to have been the case in the experience of Paul.¹⁰⁴

In other words, the modern mind requires a more evidence-based or scientific approach to Paul’s disinterested love claims; it needs to rest on a solid foundation of fact.¹⁰⁵ Although there are disagreements over what is ethical regarding the fundamental principles of science, the most important question is whether science provides the materials for ethical systems to reinforce Paul’s statement that disinterested love will not pass away.¹⁰⁶ Using scientific enquiries from biology, anthropology, physiology, and psychology, the question is: Do these sciences warrant the statement that the disinterested love of the New Testament is an innate instinct, an inalienable quality of human nature, an ever-present feature of human society? Answering this question, Carré asserts the availability of abundant proof, drawn from all these particular sciences, to confirm that what Paul and the New Testament generally designate as *agape*, and what is untechnically called disinterested love, is a fundamental instinct of human nature,

101 Bozinis, “Civic Love,” 9.

102 Bozinis, “Civic Love,” 9.

103 Bozinis, “Civic Love,” 9.

104 Henry Beach Carré, “The Adaptability of the Ethical Teaching of Paul to Our Times,” *The Biblical World* 48, no. 6 (1916): 332.

105 Carré, “The Adaptability of the Ethical Teaching of Paul to Our Times,” 333.

106 For Saint Francis de Sales (1567–1622), doctor of the church, disinterested love meant a loving attraction to a person or thing only because of the love of God. See Joseph S. Kulathunkal, “Disinterested Love: The Theory of Love in the Thought of Saint Francis de Sales” (PhD diss., Fordham University, 1991).

which can be in various terms described as sympathy, benevolence, pity, unselfishness, tender emotion, higher impulse, otherism, and altruism.¹⁰⁷

Contemporary Relevance of Paul's Ethical Love

Although the scriptures do not address many issues that contemporary humans face, as Feinberg and Feinberg argue, they still provide people with enough principles to evaluate contemporary practices and situations vis-à-vis biblical teaching.¹⁰⁸ It is the responsibility of Christians to address these issues, to ensure their beliefs and values are heard and respected in increasingly diverse and pluralistic societies. Otherwise, the ideal beliefs and practices of others may become more popular and even enacted into law. For this reason, Paul's timeless ethical thought remains relevant even today. His reflections on the ethical implications of Christianity are remarkably insightful and can be successful in addressing contemporary issues in creative and innovative ways. Paul's thoughts are highly influential in modern ethics. They offer timeless principles to guide ethical matters and help people develop meaningful relationships with one another.

First, Paul's thought on love provides an enduring model for relationships. Most notably, Paul argues in 1 Cor 13 that love is "patient and kind, not jealous or boastful," and "not arrogant or rude." Paul also provides a model of self-sacrificial love that allows us to act without expecting anything in return, giving us an example to strive towards in our relationships in society. With the collapse of traditional values in society, Paul's model of love is essential in restoring relationships between individuals in the modern world. To comprehend this, Feinberg and Feinberg argue that as Christians, we are commanded to love our neighbours and to act with benevolence and justice towards them. It is not only the benevolent or just nature of the act that makes it an act of love, but also the fact that it obeys God's command to love.¹⁰⁹ This approach to ethics is deontological, as it focuses on whether the act is governed by a rule prescribed by God, rather than on the possible consequences of the action. That said, it is not completely devoid of concern for results, as it entails consideration of the impact that our actions have on others.

Second, Paul's thoughts on neighbourly love can foster a sense of community between people of various races, backgrounds, and beliefs. In Rom 13:8–10, Paul emphasises that "love your neighbour as yourself" is the second greatest commandment. His call for neighbourly love can blend individuals from all walks of life, allowing everyone to recognise the common humanity and embrace each other's differences.

Third, Paul presents a distinctive model of ethical thought that focuses on the spiritual growth of individuals rather than simply their external behaviour. In Rom 12:2, Paul writes that those who are transformed by the renewing of their mind "will be able to test

107 Carré, "The Adaptability of the Ethical Teaching of Paul to Our Times," 334.

108 Feinberg and Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World*, 18.

109 Feinberg and Feinberg, *Ethics for a Brave New World*, 25.

and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.”¹¹⁰ By focusing on the inner transformation of individuals, Paul’s thought can help develop ethical approaches that are not simply a matter of following rules but spiritual growth and relationship building.

Fourth, Paul’s theology encourages all humans to embrace their weaknesses and limitations. Paul’s words in 2 Cor 12:9–10 provide all with a reminder that there is strength in weakness, and that one’s most powerful moments will often come in times of fragility and vulnerability. Paul’s thought helps to recognise that there is beauty and strength in personal limitations, thus allowing humans to humbly accept what they cannot do and build on it. It can therefore be argued that Paul’s ethical thought provides a much-needed source of moral guidance today. His message of neighbourly love and self-sacrifice brings humanity together, while his focus on spiritual growth reminds all that ethical behaviour is more than following rules.

Fifth, Paul’s teachings have profoundly shaped our views of ethical decision-making and social responsibility. His emphasis on charity and compassion has been used as an argument for charitable giving and for providing a social safety net for vulnerable members of society. His teachings may also have upended traditional gender roles and encouraged more egalitarian relationships between men and women. In addition, the stories presented in Paul’s teachings have become the basis of our modern ethical systems and greatly support social justice and social cohesion.

Sixth, Paul’s teachings were influential enough to shape the politics of the Roman Empire. Supporters of Paul’s teachings argued in favour of greater levels of individual freedom and greater religious tolerance. This idea became popular in Rome and influenced the emperor Constantine to legalise Christianity throughout the empire. The principles of law outlined in Paul’s teachings also provided a foundation for law-making in many parts of the world, including Europe and America.

Early Fathers’ *Ordo Amoris* as a Contemporary Lesson

According to Cassidy, US Vice President J. D. Vance recently raised some theological concerns when he sought to employ the Augustinian and Thomistic principle of the *Ordo amoris* (rightly ordered loves) to the United States’s policy on several fronts. In his words, “You love your family, and then you love your neighbor, and then you love your community, and then you love your fellow citizens in your own country, and then after that, you can focus [on] and prioritize the rest of the world.”¹¹¹ This reflects what is happening in contemporary times, where loving one’s own family, tribe, race, and country through a hierarchy of love seeks to eliminate one’s responsibility for neighbours who are further away than those who are near. This claim seems contrary to

110 See Rom 12:2.

111 Cassidy, “Augustine, Aquinas, the Veep, and the *Ordo Amoris*.”

Ordo amoris. While Cassidy claims that Vance suggests that love for one's nation should override moral obligations to non-citizens or those in other nations, Aquinas and Augustine's thoughts were used to address the situation.

The *Ordo amoris* theological construct of Thomas Aquinas is based on Augustine's belief that love must be rightly ordered to reflect divine intention, an idea that Aquinas constructs in his *Summa Theologiae*. For Augustine and Aquinas, disordered love leads to moral collapse, while ordered love directs human affections toward their true and highest end—God.¹¹² Using Matt 5:43–48, Aquinas affirms that moral law calls us to extend our concern beyond borders, recognising the universal dignity of all people. In other words, properly ordered love does not isolate but radiates outward, embracing both local and global responsibilities.¹¹³ Besides Cassidy's claim regarding the United States scenario, there are different situations around our world where *Ordo amoris* is distorted in favour of racism and social and economic inequalities. In South Africa, there are similar cases that appear to be “my colour first,” “my tribe first,” “my economic dominance first,” and “my denomination first.”

In view of Paul's ethics of love and the concomitant position of Aquinas and Augustine, contemporary practices are advised to change on the account of the demands of two points of Aquinas's theology, which represent a proper understanding of ordered love in an ideal contemporary policy and practice. Aquinas notes that a properly ordered hierarchy of love acknowledges “national loyalty and the necessity of securing the peace and security of those most near to us.” In other words, putting a fence around that love does not reflect ordered love. The theology of Aquinas requires (1) a commitment to human dignity, an economic, social and cultural responsibility which encompasses all of humanity, cities, states, nations, colours, tribes, and tongues. This suggests an interdependence rather than a self-interest approach. (2) An international rejection of theological distortion of love that seeks to protect self-interest only. In this notion, Aquinas claims that *Ordo amoris* should not be selectively applied to justify morally deficient policies and practices.¹¹⁴ This approach by Aquinas, Augustine, and related early church fathers is a call for national and global goodness that forbids discrimination, social and economic injustices; it is a higher moral to serve humanity viewed through God's love lenses.

112 Cassidy, “Augustine, Aquinas, the Veep, and the Ordo Amoris.”

113 Likewise, Ralph McInerny and John Paul II, on the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* enacted by Paul VI as a defining document for Catholic social teaching following Vatican II, show that such a view from J. D. Vance may distort the *Ordo amoris* and its ethical precepts. See McInerny, *Ethics and Politics*. Cf. Augustine, *The City of God*.

114 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Bros, 1947).

Lessons from Paul's Ethics of Love: Plus, South African Perspective

According to Toew, a more in-depth and revolutionary interpretation of the text is necessary to truly comprehend what Paul advocated.¹¹⁵ He is stressing a transformation in values and conduct among the Roman Christians, which goes beyond the emotion of love. Paul is implying an alteration to their world-view and values; a form of love that is inclusive of members of all backgrounds, including those who have been disrespected and discriminated against. Therefore, the reassessment of the Christian community's conceptions is essential to foster a love that celebrates and respects diversity.

Toew further advocates for a radical transformation of the church from hate and disunity to true unity and solidarity among Christians of divergent backgrounds. To fully embody the gospel, believers must recognise the need to adjust their thinking patterns, their world-view, and their value system to emulate the divine will. This revolutionary emphasis on collective, shared values is far more comprehensive than mere affection and respect. On this account, current church leaders in South Africa must be willing to give up personal pursuit of prestige and authority in exchange for understanding and alignment of beliefs and practices, and empowering members of marginalised groups who have been wronged by oppressive establishments. Ultimately, Paul calls for a much more far-reaching revolution than "a love ethic" could ever achieve.

Paul of Tarsus's ethics remain highly relevant for South Africa today. His teachings on mercy and justice are pertinent to the nation's present politico-social context. South African society has grappled with historical issues of inequality, racial divides, and poverty. Paul's ethics of love speak to these issues by providing the basis for an equitable and compassionate society. His notion of charity is also relevant as South Africans continue to strive for a more inclusive nation that is sensitive to poverty and issues relating to the underprivileged. Likewise, support for reconciliation among enemies is an essential message of social justice in the South African political landscape. His teachings can guide policymakers in pursuing justice and the importance of a respectful dialogue for conflict resolution. They also provide a framework for issues like affirmative action, where South African society is attempting to address the racist legacy of apartheid through policies of non-discrimination, social justice, and equal opportunity.

Conclusion

This article showed that Paul's ethic of love is founded on a robust theology of the person of Jesus Christ. In terms of soteriology, Paul makes it clear that salvation is offered to all by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. However, this saving relationship through the cross is not only averse to legalism, but it is a living relationship that requires a transformation of Christians into a life of love.¹¹⁶ The article also noted

115 Toew, *Romans*, 309.

116 See 2 Cor 5:14.

that pneumatology is closely related to Paul's ethic of love. As part of a Christian's redemption through Christ, the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit equips the believer to bear witness to the world about Christ's love and work. Likewise, the article opined that Christ believers are reminded of their responsibility and encouraged to live sacrificially and serve others in the spirit of love. This article further noted that Paul's ethics of love can unify believers across political divides, geography, language, race, and culture. Finally, the article revealed that Paul's ethics of love are eschatological. Thus, the parousia consummation in this article suggests that as believers look forward to Christ's second coming, they strive to practice the ethics of love in preparation to be considered ambassadors worthy of welcome to the kingdom at the parousia. With the same love and action, this article recommended a love-based socio-economic culture, just for all, yet promoting peaceful coexistence in South Africa and the world.

References

- Augustine, Aurelius. *The City of God*. Edited and translated by Henry Bettenson. London: Penguin Books, 2003.
- Augustine, Aurelius. *De Doctrina Christiana*. Edited and translated by R. P. H. Green. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995. <https://doi.org/10.1093/0198263341.001.0001>
- Aquinas, Thomas. *Summa Theologiae*. Translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province. New York: Benziger Bros., 1947.
- Bozinis, Constantine A. "Civic Love: A New Approach to John Chrysostom." Accessed August 4, 2025. https://chrysostom.hypotheses.org/files/2024/08/Civic-Love_Constantine-A.-Bozinis.pdf
- Carré, Henry Beach. "The Adaptability of the Ethical Teaching of Paul to Our Times." *The Biblical World* 48, no. 6 (1916): 331–341. <https://doi.org/10.1086/475656>
- Cho, Youngmo. *Spirit and Kingdom in the Writings of Luke and Paul: An Attempt to Reconcile These Concepts*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2007.
- Eisenbaum, Pamela M. *Paul Was Not a Christian: The Original Message of a Misunderstood Apostle*. New York: Harperone, 2009.
- Feinberg, John. S., and Paul D. Feinberg. *Ethics for a Brave New World*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1993.
- Green, Gene L. "Rediscovering Paul: An Introduction to His World, Letters and Theology." *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 19, no. 3 (2009): 444–446. <https://doi.org/10.2307/26424234>

- Hausmann, Ricardo, Tim O'Brien, Andrés Fortunato, Alexia Lochmann, Kishan Shah, Lucila Venturi, Sheyla Enciso-Valdivia, et al. 2023. "Growth through Inclusion in South Africa." <https://growthlab.hks.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/2023-11-cid-wp-434-south-africa-growth-through-inclusion.pdf>
- Homrighausen, Elmer G. "Crisis in the Churches of South Africa." *Theology Today* 24, no. 1 (1967): 64–74. <https://doi.org/10.1177/004057366702400109>
- Kärkkäinen, Veli-Matti. *The Trinity: Global Perspectives*. Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2007.
- Konstan, David. "Before Forgiveness: Classical Antiquity, Early Christianity and Beyond." *Classical Journal* 38 (2011): 91–109. https://www.antonioacasella.eu/restorative/Konstan_2011.pdf
- Kulathunkal, Joseph S. "Disinterested Love: The Theory of Love in the Thought of Saint Francis de Sales." PhD diss., Fordham University, 1991. <https://research.library.fordham.edu/dissertations/AAI9137204>
- Lane, Calvin. "Book Review: The Rise and Fall of the Incomparable Liturgy: The Book of Common Prayer, 1559–1906." *Anglican Theological Review* 100, no. 4 (2018): 852–853. <https://doi.org/10.1177/000332861810000437>
- Luther, Martin. *Luther's Works*. Edited by Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann. Volume 37. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1999.
- McInerny, Ralph. *Ethics and Politics: Selected Essays*. Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2001.
- Ngien, Dennis. *The Suffering of God According to Martin Luther's "Theologia Crucis."* Lausanne: Peter Lang, 1995.
- Olyan, Saul M. *Moral Vision in the Hebrew Bible*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2011.
- Orr, James. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*. Albany, OR: Ages Software, 1999.
- Peckham, John. 2016. "Ethics of Love? Morality and the Meaning of Divine Love." *Andrews University Seminary Student Journal* 2, no. 1 (2016): 1–16. <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1019&context=aussj>
- Plato. *Plato's Symposium*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2013.
- Thiselton, Anthony C. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*. New International Greek Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000.
- Toew, John E. *Romans: Believers Church Bible Commentary*. Herald Press [online], 2004.

Schlatter, Adolf. *The Theology of the Apostles: The Development of New Testament Theology*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999.

Singer, Irving. *The Nature of Love*. Vol. 1. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009.
<https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/9780262512725.001.0001>

Walton, John H. *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible*. Ada, MI: Baker Academic, 2018.

Walvoord, John F., and Roy B. Zuck. *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old and New Testament*. Colorado Springs, CO: Victor Books, 1983.