

## **Romans: A Call to Fulfill the Law Through Love**

**Romans 13:8-10**

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If you have your Bibles I'd invite you to turn with me to Romans chapter 13. We are working our way through a marvelous section of the book of Romans in which Paul spells out the Christian way of life. Last week we considered Paul's directives regarding our conduct in relation to the state and to the government authorities. This week Paul continues on the theme on how Christians are to relate to their general societal relationships. This directive of love which Paul is going to put forth in this passage concerns our love for fellow men, not just our love for believers, not just our love for our family relations, but for our love of all men as we are going to see.

This whole section of Romans in chapter 12 and chapter 13 is Paul's fleshing out of what it means to live your life in light of the realities that you are to be a living sacrifice to the Lord as your spiritual service of worship. This is what it means to put your life on the altar. It's what it means to die for the Lord Jesus Christ. It's what it means to live the whole of life as an act of worship. Paul is putting flesh on that particular command as he goes through each of these areas and gives us directions under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Let's hear God's holy and inspired word in Romans 13 beginning in verse 8.

Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law. For this, "YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY, YOU SHALL NOT MURDER, YOU SHALL NOT STEAL, YOU SHALL NOT COVET," and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying, "YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF." Love does no wrong to a neighbor; love therefore is the fulfillment of the law.

Amen. This is God's holy and inspired word. May He write it's eternal truth upon our hearts. Let's pray.

*Our Lord and our God, we ask that You would cause us by Your Spirit to behold wonderful things from Your law, and we ask as well that You would, by that same Spirit, give us the impetus of love so that we might fill up the commands of your*

*law. In Jesus name. Amen.*

Paul in these three great little verses tells us several important things. He tells us to pay our debts so that we might be good witnesses. He tells us that we can never pay off the debt of love we owe. He tells us that he wants us to love everyone, not just believers. He tells us that this kind of love fulfills the law. I'd like to spend a few moments with you tonight looking at two or three things that Paul emphasizes in this great passage. Let's begin in verse 8 where Paul says two things.

### **I. The Christian who practices real NT love in neighbor relations is in fact fulfilling the law.**

He tells us to pay off our debts and then he comments that we can't really pay off the debt of love. We are to pay off our debts, except the debt of love that cannot be paid off, but in fact fulfills the law of God. Paul makes it clear here in verse 8 that the Christian who practices real New Testament love in his neighbor relations is, in fact, fulfilling the law that God gave through Moses pertaining to our relationship to neighbors. This passage as a whole is a call to Christian love, it is about our love to man in general. In Romans 12, Paul does use the famous "love one another" phrase to refer specifically to love for our neighbor. Remember, in verses 1 through 7 of Romans 13 Paul's already been talking about how we relate to civil authorities. Now, it is clear from the context, his concern is our general witness to mankind based upon our general love for mankind. So the Apostle Paul is speaking is speaking specifically of our love to man in general, our love to fellow man, and our love to neighbor.

Paul begins by saying several interesting things in verse 8. First, he says that we are to owe nothing to anyone. When Paul says owe nothing to anyone he's not forbidding Christians to borrow. He is, however, saying that the believer should be faithful and responsible in the payment of his debts. He should not leave debts unpaid. This passage could be literally translated, *do not continue owing, pay your debts*. He's just said, pay your taxes, and now he says, pay your debts. The logic makes perfect sense. Christian witness is compromised by a failure to fulfill lawful responsibility to the civil authorities. Christian witness is compromised by a failure to deal honestly and rightly with regard to our own debts and things that we owe. So the Apostle first gives this practical direction with regard to our relationship to our fellow man, *owe nothing to anyone*, and then secondly he adds this in verse eight, *except to love one another*. In other words, there is one debt that can never be discharged. You can pay your taxes and be done with them. You can become inspired and pay off all your credit card debts and be done with them. But you can never be done with the debt of love, the Apostle Paul says.

Think of Isaac Watts' expression of that truth in a familiar hymn that you often

sing when we come to the Lord's table at First Presbyterian Church. Do you remember what Watts says, "When I survey the wondrous cross on which the Prince of Glory died, my richest gain I count but loss, and pour contempt on all my pride. Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast, and save in the death of Christ my God, all the vain things that charm me most, I sacrifice them to His blood. See, from His head, His hands, His feet, sorrow and love flow mingled down, did e'er such love and sorrow meet, or thorns compose so rich a crown. Would the whole realm of nature mine, that were a present far too small; love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all."

We are debtors to His love. But Paul in this passage, however, regards us not only to be debtors to God through the mercy that He has shown to us through Jesus Christ, he considers us to be indebted to our fellow men. Paul is saying here that we are to act as if we are indebted to mankind in general. We are indebted to them for a return of love. This is a Pauline principle that you find elsewhere in the book of Romans. He will say to the churches in Macedonia, 'Look, those Christians in Jerusalem and the other Christians in Palestine sent out missionaries. That's how you're a Christian now. The poor congregation in Jerusalem is in need of help, you are indebted to them. You need to help them.'

He can talk about our indebtedness to believers, but in Romans 1:14, the apostle can talk about his indebtedness to Pagan and barbarian Gentiles. He can say, "I am under obligation. I am indebted to both slave and free for the gospel. The apostle is saying here that he expresses that indebtedness in love in sharing the gospel. Here he is asking all believers to show their realization of their indebtedness to mankind in general. Those who even know not Christ. Paul is calling on us here to love one another and not simply believers, but our fellow men.

He adds thirdly here in verse 8, "That he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law." That is, the Christian who fulfills this New Testament directive of neighbor love, the Apostle Paul says, is in fact fulfilling the law of Moses in its directives to neighbor love. *Fulfill* is a beautiful way of saying this. John Murray says this about the word *fulfill*: "Fulfill is a richer term than obey. It means the law has received the full measure of that which it requires." Paul is calling on us here to infuse Christian neighbor love into all our societal relationships. Often times Christian ministers and teachers emphasis this truth from passages like Matthew 25, verses 31 through 46, where Jesus talks about His judgment at the end of time and indicates that He will judge those who refuse to care for and minister to those who are prison and who are without clothing and that are in need. And He will reward those who minister to those who are in that condition. And this is often times pressed upon Christians as why we need to love mankind in general.

However, that passage is in fact directly applied to our relationship to believers by the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. You remember He adds that crucial phrase in that passage, "As you do it to the least of these My brethren so you have done it

to Me.” Sometimes people go to John 13 and the command, “A new commandment I give you. That you love one another as I have loved you,” and they enjoin upon Christians that kind of love for fellow man. In John 13, the focus again is upon the disciples literally loving one another as Jesus has loved them.

In this passage in Romans 13, Paul is in fact directly addressing this issue of the Christian love for his fellow man and he is calling on us to exercise this kind of love. “While we may satisfy every claim of the law, but nothing can satisfy the claims of love,” Robinson said about this passage. The interesting thing about the exercise of this debt is that you get richer as you pay the debt. Listen to what Robert Haldane says, “The more they pay off this debt, the richer they will be in the thing that is paid.”

You pay off this debt with love, and as you pay off this debt, you don't end up with less love, you end up with more love. That's the amazing, the ironic, the paradoxical nature of the Christians relation to the world. Paul's calling on us to show real New Testament love, neighbor love in our relationship with our fellow man in this passage. That is the first great thing that I want you to see.

## **II. The second table of the law is summed up in neighbor love.**

The second thing is this. Look at verse 9, Paul goes on to list some of the specific duties of the second table of the law of Moses, commandments 5 through 10, which specifically deal with our relationship to our fellow man. As he lists these specific duties of the law's second table, he says that they are entailed, not only in that Levitical command of neighbor love in Leviticus chapter 19 verse 18, but they are also entailed in the dominical command to neighbor love which comes from Jesus Christ, when he repeats in His teaching the words, and expands and interprets those words from Leviticus 19, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” So Paul in verse 9 rattles off a number of the second table commands and reminds us that they fulfilled the law of love, the law first set down expressly in Leviticus regarding neighbor love and reiterated so often in the teaching of Jesus.

Now we might want to pause here and make a couple of observations. The first thing is, it is very common to hear Leviticus 19:18, especially as it is quoted and explained and exhorted by Jesus Christ in the gospels as a call to self-love. As a matter of fact, that is not a gospel or New Testament or even a distinctively Christian idea, that you have to work at loving yourself before you are able to love other people. It is assumed by Paul and Jesus and by Moses and Leviticus that we naturally care for ourselves. There is a natural instinct in self-preservation and it is that which is to be extended to even to the point of preferring the needs and interest of others which is the basis of this call to love your neighbor as yourself.

So it's not a call to sit around and spend several years working on loving yourself so you can eventually move on to loving your neighbor. In fact, the gospel logic that is constantly found in the Scripture is, you can't really love your neighbor until you have been loved savingly by God. When you have experienced the fullness of God's saving love you are filled up to the brim and overflow in love to neighbor. So, God's love for us is the foundation of our love to others.

There is, of course, another sense in which self-love is an impossibility. There is no love in solitude, there must always be another to love for love to exist, because love is relational. So in that sense, self-love is an oxymoron, it's a contradiction, it's an impossibility. That's one side.

One other side is this: we need to pause and ask ourselves what love is. That's word that we use a great deal. We may have an impressionistic idea of what love means. In our culture we tend to think of love first in emotional categories. The Old Testament, we might say, if we were to make a broad-brush generalization, thinks of and describes love in action categories more than emotional categories. You'll find passages like this in the Scriptures, "If you love Me keep My commandments, where keeping the commandments is parallel to loving. We see that in Jesus teaching in John 15, but it's based on the very principles that we've already studied in Exodus chapter 20 verses 4 through 6 in the second commandment. Those who love the Lord keep His commandments," Those who hate the Lord don't keep His commandments. That's more of an action statement than an emotional statement about people.

But what is love? John Murray says this, and I'm going to read this to you twice because it's very thick, but it's also very good: "Love is emotive, motive, and expulsive. It is emotive and therefore creates infinity with an affection for the object of love. It is motive in that it impels us to action. It is expulsive because it expels that which is alien to the interest in which love seeks to promote." Listen to that one more time. "Love is emotive, motive and expulsive. It is emotive and therefore creates an infinity with and affection for the object of love. It is motive in that it impels us to action. It is expulsive because it expels what is alien to the interest of which love seeks to promote." That is really a rich definition. It's hard to hear; it's easier to read and meditate upon. I encourage you to take it perhaps, and meditate on that definition.

Let me give you an easier one. "Love is seeking the best interest of another." It's that kind of practical love that Paul is clearly calling us to in this passage, having started off with these commands, don't commit adultery, don't murder, don't steal, don't covet. By refraining from those activities one is expressing a practical, tangible love to neighbor. So, we see that love is not some sort of an alternative ethical system to the moral law. No, Paul says, the love command is summary of that same law.

We might also say that Paul is saying that if we're not loving our fellow man that

way, we are not fulfilling the law. He is saying that to people who took fulfilling the law very seriously. That meant a great deal. He's calling us, if we are serious about the law, to show love in this sort of way. The second table of the law is summed up in neighbor love we learn here in verse 9.

### **III. The law proscribes harm to neighbor, love abstains from harm to neighbor, therefore love fulfills the law.**

One last thing I draw your attention to, and you'll see it in verse 10. Paul again emphasizes that love and law are not contradictory tendencies in the Christian life, as if obeying the law somehow made one less loving or that being more loving made you less interested in obeying the law. They are not contradictory tendencies in the Christian life. One, love, is the fulfillment of the other — law. The law, he tells us in verse 10, proscribes harm to our neighbor. Don't murder, don't commit adultery, don't steal, don't covet, he's just said that in verse 9. And what he tells us in verse 10, love abstains from that kind of harm, for neighbor love does no wrong to a neighbor. Therefore, Paul says, love impels you to do precisely what the law would have you do. So, love and law are not enemies in the Christian life, they are not competitors in the Christian life, they are not contradictory tendencies in the Christian life, they are friends.

Note that Paul even begins with a negative definition of love in verse 10, "Love does no wrong." You see, there are 'Nos' in love just as there are 'Nos' in the law. True love is always going to have a negative side. The point here is rather to parallel the law, which is often itself stated in the negative, *thou shall not*, and to imply that refraining from doing our neighbor harm implies the opposite, that is, doing our neighbor good, showing him love. Love, Paul says here fills the law.

If I could explain it this way, I would say that if we looked at the standard of God's law as a vessel, as a cup to be filled, we can say that it is love and love alone that fills that vessel as God intended it to be filled. Now, we need to pause here and quickly say that this love is not the means of justification. This love is not the means of salvation. It's the expression of gratitude of the antecedent regenerating grace of God which has saved us. It's the ethical channel through which the new life in Christ flows from our free justification. If we think about that for a few moments we will understand why this is so important. The great Southern Presbyterian commentator, W.S. Plummer, at the end of each of his commentary sections on the book of Romans, has a series of questions and comments that he calls Doctrinal and Practical Remarks. In one of those in his commentary on Romans, he asks a series of questions to prompt his self-examination about whether we love our fellow man. It was convicting to read it and it was more convicting to have to type it. Listen to it and ask yourselves these questions as I read them: Is your love to man genuine? Will it bear the test found in the second table of the law? Are you guilty of sinful anger? Of hatred? Envy? The desire of revenge? Excessive passions? Distracting cares? Sinful

indulgences? Do you hate peevish and provoking words? Are your thoughts, feeling, and actions kind, meek, gentle, charitable, courteous, forgiving? Do you cherish all chaste and pure thoughts, purposes, and imaginations? Are your actions virtuous? Is your apparel modest? Is your behavior light or impudent? Do you abhor all that is unchaste in songs, books, pictures and thoughts? Do you practice oppression, usury, lawsuits, deception? Is your calling lawful? Ought you not to make restitution in some case? Do you promote truth and the good name of all men as you can? Do you hate reviling, scoffing, whispering flatteries slander, exaggeration? Do you grieve at the good name of any lost? Do you needlessly mention the faults of any? Do you love to show kindness to all? Are you fair at making bargains? Do you plead your rank, condition or former standing as a reason why you should not love your poor neighbor?"

It is precisely because that kind of practical action is demanded in the command to love that we need grace, because none of us love that way. That is what the law and the gospel calls us to- to love that way. It is precisely because we do not love that way that we need grace. That's why Paul spends eleven chapters on that before he begins to lay out this beautiful representation of what it means to live the Christian life. The foundation for this kind of living in love is found only in the grace of God, and experienced, received, lived out in dependence upon the Holy Spirit's divine grace. Let's pray.

*Our Lord and our God, make us to love Thee as Thine angels love and our neighbors as ourselves. In Jesus name. Amen.*

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