

Sermon Title: The Law of Love
Biblical Text: Romans 13:8-10
Teaching Series: Justified by Love
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Romans 13:8-10

Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, “You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,” and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.

Last week we imagined a renewed posture in the world. *What if Christians lived not like those who thought they were right, but like those who knew they were loved?* Jesus' words were foundational to Paul's instruction to pay taxes (vv.5-7). But we weren't really talking about taxes. We were talking about worship, transformation, and love. Our Christian witness, or what we might call our social integrity, is predicated upon our willingness to do seemingly innocuous things like pay taxes. Because when we're willing to shoulder burdens for the common good, people are more readily willing to listen when we speak about and live for justice, mercy, and faithfulness.

Paul builds on this theme of love today. And like his teaching on taxes, this good word is spoken in concert with Jesus' own message about love. In fact, the Christian vision love takes us back all the way to the words of Moses and the original commandments and laws given to God's people. Perhaps surprise, by true. Love has always been wrapped up with the law.

Love is fundamental to our existence. Scientist C Sue Carter and Stephen W Porges explain in their report for the *National Library of Medicine*, "*Without loving relationships, humans fail to flourish, even if all of their other basic needs are met*" (*The Biochemistry of Love*). Yet, we have a really hard time defining and understanding love. Ask a number of people what love is and you'll get just as many answers. This is tricky, our need couldn't be higher but our understanding of love couldn't be more complex.

In Paul's day and ours, we seek to define love and use it to curry favor for all kinds of perspectives and ways of life. Love becomes a reason all to itself. And as we navigate the Scriptures, we're tempted to think about love in a couple misguided ways. We either belittle love or deify love. We make too little or too much of love. For instance, today we might be tempted to minimize Paul's teachings about the relationship between the law and love as mere sentiment. What matters is truth and obedience, and submitting ourselves to a holy God. We misunderstand love as the enemy of the law. If not, we'll likely be tempted to dismiss truth in general and the law in particular as unnecessary in the face of love. What matter is loving people,

and we shouldn't worry about the particulars of obedience and commandments.

We'll misunderstand the law as the enemy of love.

You see? We'll make too little or too much of love. We either make love our god or make love irrelevant. The Bible does neither. Jesus does neither. Paul does neither. Instead our passage today places love and the law in relationship. That's what I'd like to talk about today. I want to talk about the relationship love has with the law and the law has with love.

Here's how we'll move through the text ...

- Love is a *permanent obligation*.
- Love is *defined by God*.
- Love is *the only law*.

We make love irrelevant or make love our god. We make love the enemy of truth or truth the enemy of love. Too little or too much. So first we'll address the lie that love is irrelevant and then that love is god ... then we'll consider Paul's vision for a healthy relationship between love and truth.

[Pray]

Movement 1: Love is a Permanent Obligation (v.8, 1:14, Matthew 5:42, John 13:34, Genesis 1:27)

Love is a permanent obligation. That's Paul's message as he opens up his next thought. ***Read Romans 13:8 ... Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.*** Remember, Paul has just told us that we should pay the taxes we owe ... pay the revenue we owe ... pay respect where it's owed ... and pay honor to whom it's owed (vv.5-7). In essence he's been instructing his readers to live debt free. However, he's not saying that all debt is bad. Jesus himself said, ***Read Matthew 5:42 ... Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.*** It's not wrong to borrow. Not all debt is bad. Rather, the point Paul is making is that Christians should be people who pay their debts. Except for one. There is one debt we can never fully pay because it doesn't work like other forms of debt.

That is the debt of love.

Paul first spoke about this love-debt back in Romans 1:14. He said, ***Read Romans 1:14 ... I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish.*** The Greek word translated as "obligation" in chapter 1 is the noun version of the word translated "owe" in Romans 13. As you can see, in chapters 1 and 13 the debt is not just to one group of people. It's to Greeks and non-Greeks. It's to church family and friends and neighbors. It's to people who agree with us and people who disagree with us. As Christians we owe everyone

love. In fact, Jesus tells us in John's gospel account that this is how the world will identify us. *They'll know we are followers of Jesus because of our love* (John 13:35). Because our love reflects his love.

What if Christians lived not like those who thought they were right, but like those who knew they were loved?

You see, this begins to confront the lie that love is the enemy of truth. You see, love is telling the truth. Many of us have been taught that we have a message to share. Not that we have love to demonstrate. Namely we've been told to be a Christian is to believe and preach the gospel, as well as certain other theological and social doctrines. We need to tell people they are sinners in need of a Savior. And so we get nervous when we make too much of love because we quickly want to remind everyone of our commitment to truth. *Right?* But love is not truth's enemy. Love tells the truth. Paul is telling us that love embodies truth. Love is bigger than a message, but it does not negate the message ... it proves the message. We are bound by a story and reality which calls us to love everyone.

Paul is saying we owe everyone love. And we always will ...

- We owe everyone love because we've been loved. Jesus told his followers, ***Read John 13:34 ... A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.*** Our permanent obligation to love is rooted in the infinite way we've been loved.

Because God's love never runs out, our debt to love never ends. And so when we love, we tell the truth about God's character.

- We also owe everyone love because they've been created. Our nature demands love because everyone has been made in the image of God. The base line of the Christian understanding of human values is, ***Read Genesis 1:27 ... So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.*** The divine image tell us everyone has dignity. Preacher and social activist John Perkins explains that, "***You don't give people dignity... You affirm it!***" Everyone is worthy of love because everyone is made by God. And so when we love, we tell the truth about God's nature.

So, as long as those two things are true ... you are loved and we bear the image ... you and I are obligated, we owe everyone love. Because of how you've been loved and how we've all been created, we are always in a love-debt.

In reflecting on this passage Origen, a third-century Egyptian Bible scholar, said "***The debt of charity is permanent, and we are never quit of it; for we must pay it daily and yet always owe it***" (C. H. Dodd: *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans*). That's a lot. It seems like an awfully heavy and unending burden, at first blush. But others have seen this love-debt from a different angle. One NT teacher rejoiced that, "***The more they pay of this debt, the richer they will be in the thing that is paid.***" Love is generative. Love is the debt that pays you back. That's how

author and pastor Tim Keller put it, true love "*is the only kind that makes more of itself as it goes along*" (*King's Cross*). Love begets love. Yet again, telling the truth about God.

When we love we don't simply nourish the soul of another, but our own soul. Love is the only debt we continually pay and it is the only debt that pays us back. Love always gives more than it requires. This is true even when love is not reciprocated because when we choose to love someone who does not love us back we are free ... we are unburdened by shame, guilt, selfishness, and death. Love is freedom, yet it is *our permanent obligation*.

Movement 2: Love is Defined by God (vv.8-9, John 15:12-13)

Okay, so we owe everyone love. As Christians we don't just have a message to tell, but a love to demonstrate. And this love tells the truth. *But what exactly is love? Who defines it and sets it's limit and power?* The way we fulfill this debt of love all depends on how we define love. Here's where we begin to confront the lie that truth is the enemy of love. We get nervous that when truth interrupts the supposed natural flow of love, then love is not genuine.

Perhaps you grew up in a more liberal church environment or perhaps you didn't go to church at all. Regardless, many of us were shaped by the idea that truth was coded language for cold moralism or a rules heavy spiritual environment. And, it

often is. A list of rights and wrongs, who was in and who was out. We learned that truth was the absence of love. Consequently love was solidified in our minds and hearts as something self-determined and purely in the eye of the beholder.

Ironically, this vision of truth is the prevailing truth in modern cities like Chicago: love is it's own reason ... personally defined and fulfilled.

John tells us though that *God is love* (1 John 4:8,16). In other words, love is not a self-determined value or affection or need. Love is not it's own irrefutable reason, love is determined by God; his behaviors, character, affections, and Word. That's what Paul explains next: love is *defined by God*.

Look again at v.8 on into v.9. *Read Romans 13:8-9 ... Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, "You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet," and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."* He says that love somehow fulfills or embodies the fullness of the law. We'll get to that more in a bit. He lists a few of those particular laws or commandments which love fulfills.

Paul lists the sixth, seventh, eighth, and tenth commandments from Exodus 20. All of the laws he mentions deal with neighbor. They're about how we treat and love others. In other words, Paul defines love by interpreting the law. He says ...

- Love is faithfulness. *And so we don't commit adultery.*

- Love is nurturing. *And so we don't murder.*
- Love is generous. *And so we don't take, we give.*
- Love is content. *And so we don't covet.*

Paul defines love by interpreting the law. And the law is not arbitrary. The law is true and good and beautiful, because the law flows from the truth, goodness, and beauty of God's character. Love is faithful, because God is faithful. Love is nurturing, because God is nurturing. Love is generous, because God is generous. Love is content, because God is content. *Are you with me?* The law reflects God and God is love, therefore love looks like God. Love is ***defined by God.***

It's challenging to envision a love which comes with parameters. Because love is so deeply personal. *Right?* In 2019 Allure magazine surveyed 31 different perspectives on love. The author of the article, Rosemary Donahue, explained that ***"Hallmark, Hollywood, and Nashville have all tried to define love, but the reality is that we each have our own definition of this shape-shifting concept"*** (31 *People Reveal Their Definitions of Love*, February 14, 2019). A myriad of participants shared many thoughtful and beautiful reflections ... *love is building up ... love is giving space for refuge ... love makes room for growth ... love is sharing food ... love is comfort.*

It was inspiring to read the various expression of affection and joy people find in loving and being loved. But it was also clear, we don't mind defining love. I just don't think we want someone else defining love for us. Yet in not providing a

universal definition for love, we've define love universally. *Don't we?* The writer defined love as a *shape-shifting concept*. They are not alone in their perspective. We've been discipled by this wider cultural narrative that to love is to allow someone to define love on their terms. But that is a definition of love. *You see?* Now, there is great merit in this value. In progressive society there is a high importance placed on persons dignity and autonomy and uniqueness and value. That's a really good. But the goodness goes deeper. The law of love runs deeper.

Scripture affirms our longing for universal dignity but it also challenges our propensity to pick and choose which parameters of love suit us. We learn that love is not whatever we say it is. Love must look like God. Love must conform to his image. That's how Jesus could say, *Read John 15:12-13 ... "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends."* Jesus is the one who embodied and demonstrated love perfectly. And he does so by telling the truth. Because no matter how we define love individually or as a people, we've all been an adulterous people ... we've all hated and failed to nurture one another ... we've lacked generosity ... we've longed for what others have. Our refusal to love broke our souls and our world. We need the sacrificial love of Jesus because we've failed to love. His love teaches and shapes and empowers us to love others as he's loved us.

He suffered for our sinfulness.

He bled, when our blood should have been spilt.

He died, our death.

He was buried, in our grave.

*What if we lived like that? What if Christians lived not like those who thought they were right, but like those who knew they were loved? You see, it's on the cross where Jesus makes a choice. Or rather, refuses to make a choice. He does not choose between truth and love. He brings them together. In truth, he dealt with our sin and brokenness. In truth, he honored his Father's glory and holiness and righteousness. In love, he had compassion for us and heals our ailment by allowing his body to be infected. In love, he took our place. Truth and love, as one. Love, *defined by God.**

Movement 3: Love is the Only Law (v.10,

Deuteronomy 6:5, Leviticus 19:18, Matthew 22:34-40)

We owe everyone love. It's a permanent obligation. Christians don't just have a message to tell, but a love to demonstrate. A love which has been defined and demonstrated through the nature of God and the cross of Jesus Christ. Truth and love are not adversaries ... they are allies. In fact, this love, this type of love, real love ... becomes our only law. Paul continues, ***Read Romans 13:10 ... Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.*** Paul repeats the idea that love is fulfilling of the law. It's a principle which spans the pages of the Christian Scriptures. That's what Jesus just said in John 15, *his commandment was love.* It's why in Moses penned the *Shema* this way, ***Read Deuteronomy 6:5 ... You***

shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And he recorded early on in Leviticus that, *Read Leviticus 19:18 ... You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.* Loving God and others has been the central command of the Bible.

*Remember our tangent last week? We considered how Jesus' teaching about taxes pointed us to a third way of understanding Paul's instruction, beyond right and wrong. Our tangent took us to Matthew 22. Jesus was being tested by four different groups of moralistic and antagonistic people, about four different ideas. First came the disciples of the Pharisees and the Herodians about taxes. Then came the Sadducees about marriage and resurrection. Then the Pharisees came to talk about the law. *Read Matthew 22:34-40 ... But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets."* Which is the greatest commandment? Love. Love is *the only law*. It's not what we feel. It's not what we define. Love is our obligation. Love is a reflection of God. Love is what God commands.*

Jesus points his questioners to both Leviticus and Deuteronomy. Loving neighbor. Loving God. But then he says, *all the commandments are dependent on love.* *What's this mean?* Well, I think it means that the Christian life is not a list. It's not a compendium of what you must do and what you must not do. Rather, there's a third way. It's a relationship with the Heavenly Father. It's a journey with the Beloved. It's grace and reality; freedom and righteousness; love and truth. North African theologian St. Augustine brilliantly summarized it this way, ***“Love God and do whatever you please: for the soul trained in love to God will do nothing to offend the One who is Beloved.”*** When we love God, we will obey his Word. When we love our neighbors, we will do no harm.

We'll be faithful.

We'll be nurturing.

We'll be generous.

We'll be content.

Love is ***the only law*** because love fulfills the whole law.

And so the question for us today is not, *are you doing what God has asked you? Are you right? Are you wrong?* Rather, *is love at the center of your concept of God ... yourself ... and others? Has the love of Jesus so infiltrated your mind and heart that it animates and directs you?*

What if Christians lived not like those who thought they were right, but like those who knew they were loved? What if we lived like love was our permanent obligation? Like love was defined by God? Like love was our only law? Well, I think we see truth and love in harmony and no longer in competition.