

Sermon: Loving One Another Fulfills the Law: Romans 13:8-10

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Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. 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 (Rom. 13:8-10, ESV).

The Beatles wrote a popular song titled, "All you need is love." On first glance Paul appears to be saying the same thing in Rom 13:8-10, for he says that the only thing we owe one another is love and that love fulfills the law. What we need to do in each situation of life, then, is to ask ourselves, what is the most loving thing to do in this circumstance? How can I show love to my neighbors? These questions are certainly the right ones to ask, but we could be misled into thinking that the most loving thing for neighbors is obvious and apparent to all. Most secular people would agree with the Beatles that all we need is love, and they would salute Paul for the same opinion. But neither the Beatles nor secular people really agree with Paul on what love is. Paul would say that the most loving thing you could do for neighbors is persuade them to repent of their sins and believe in Jesus Christ. The Beatles certainly did not believe that, nor do most people in this world. Even though all people would agree that we should love our neighbors, they would not agree on what love for neighbors looks

like (even Christians disagree because often we do not know the scriptures well). And for those of us who are believers, the authoritative and inerrant scriptures define for us the nature of love. I think these verses in Rom 13:8-10 suggest that there are two mistakes that we may fall into when defining love.

What is the first blunder in judgment? The first mistake is to say that since love fulfills the law we no longer have any need for commandments. Some understand these verses to say that the only moral guideline Christians need is love. After all, v. 8 says that the only thing we owe one another is love, and that the one who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law. Furthermore, v. 9 says that the different commands of the law are summed up in love. They argue, therefore, that we do not actually need commandments anymore. All we need to ask ourselves about any course of action is the question found in v. 10. Does our action actually hurt our neighbor? If it does not hurt our neighbor, if it does our neighbor good, then that action must be loving, and thus we fulfill the law, for Paul says in v. 10 that love is the fulfillment of the law. Those who believe this way bristle against imposing any commands upon believers. They think this is a form of legalism. They condemn as legalism any commands which say "you should do this," or "you should not do this." They insist that believers are not under any "commands," except the command to love one another.

In most errors there is a grain of truth, and I will return later to the element of truth present in this view. But at this point I want to put the spotlight on the massive error that is found in this view. When Paul says that love is the fulfillment of the law, he does not intend to say that we have no need for commandments. To say that love is the fulfillment of the law does not imply that we can dispense with all commandments. Instead, specific commandments are mentioned in v. 9 so that we will see how love looks in action. One cannot commit adultery, murder, steal, and covet and claim to be loving. Specific commandments are given so that we will see in a concrete and practical way how love manifests itself in everyday life.

Paul only lists four commandments here, but we should not conclude from this that these are the only four commandments we need to keep in order to be loving. Notice in v. 9 that he adds the words "and any other commandment." In other words, Paul did not have the time or space to list all the commandments for his readers. But his intention is clear. All the moral norms and absolutes of God's law describe what is involved in being loving. No one can claim to be loving, while at the same time he or she is violating God's commandments.

Why is it so important to have commandments in order to love one another? Because love without commandments so easily descends into vagueness or sentimentality. We can so easily deceive ourselves into thinking that we are loving because we have warm feelings towards other people. Love is easily confused in our society with being "nice." But "niceness" does not necessarily mean that one is acting in a loving manner. A person can be "nice" and at the same time be guilty of

blatantly violating God's commands.

The word *love* without commandments is a plastic word that can be twisted and shaped in many different ways to defend a course of action that is in fact contrary to God's law. For instance, a man may justify an adulterous affair with another woman because of "love." He could say to himself, "You know it is not really fair to my present wife, Susan, to continue being married to her when I do not really feel affection for her. And since my feelings of love and affection are so strong for my girl friend, Katherine, they must be from God. Only God would grant me such delight and happiness in being with another person. I know it sounds strange, but I believe God really wants me to break off my marriage with Susan and marry Katherine. God is not the sort of God who would want me to live miserably with Susan when he has planted a deep love for Katherine in my heart. God is not a God who wants people to live together when they are so unhappy, and so I believe he is leading me to start a new life with Katherine."

All of this may sound convincing and even "spiritual." But we know that all of this talk simply rationalizes sin. Love cannot contradict the commandment, "you shall not commit adultery."

Or think of this example. Margie is twenty-one years old and deeply in love with Greg and they both want to get married. The only problem is that Greg is not a Christian. Margie, though, is convinced that these powerful feelings of affection she has for Greg must be from God. Her pastor counsels her not to marry him, but she believes that God will use her to bring Greg to the faith. Thus, she goes ahead and marries him and asks God to bless their union. Once again, Margie's resolve to marry Greg may sound very

spiritual, especially when she says that the Lord will use her to win Greg to the faith. But her decision to marry Greg violates a specific command of scripture. First Corinthians 7:39 says to marry “only in the Lord” which means that believers must only marry other believers.

Consider another matter. The issue of homosexuality is becoming more and more controversial in our society. Many people say that evangelical believers are homophobic and claim that we hate homosexuals. What Deb Price wrote in 1994 about those who morally disapprove of homosexuality reflects what many people think today. She wrote, “Hatred is a sickness, discrimination is a crime and bigotry is a sin.”¹ Her intent is clear. The real sin is not committed by homosexuals, but those who morally condemn homosexuality are guilty of the sins of hatred and bigotry. Advocates of homosexuality charge us with being unloving because we make homosexuals feel bad for their behavior. Indeed, they would appeal to the law of love in order to defend the rightness of homosexuality. How can we condemn people, they say, who love each other, want to be faithful to one another, and are not hurting anyone else?

Surely if we hate homosexuals, we should repent of this sin and resolve to love them as we do all other sinners. But we can never say that loving homosexuals means that we accept homosexual behavior as morally praiseworthy and loving. And many people today will say that we “hate” homosexuals if we say their behavior is wrong. But only God has the prerogative to define what is loving, and Rom 1:26-27 clearly teaches that homosexual relations are contrary to nature, that they violate God’s intended order in which one man marries one woman. Those who

warn homosexuals about the evil of their behavior actually love them more than all those who think there is nothing wrong with homosexuality, for we inform them of God’s perspective on homosexuality. When we say that homosexual relations are sinful, we are not imposing our opinion on others, but revealing what God thinks about homosexuality.

Imagine if someone had a bomb in his hand that was due to detonate in three hours. The person holding the bomb really enjoyed holding it and didn’t believe it was a bomb. Some people told him, “What you are holding in your hand is a bomb. It will explode in ten minutes and destroy you.” Others replied, “How can you be so unloving and hateful to tell him that what he holds in his hand is a bomb. Can’t you see that he enjoys holding that piece of equipment? You are shaming him and making him feel bad for holding this thing, when it is perfectly normal to do so.” The people who defend the person’s right to hold the bomb “appear” to be more loving than those who warn him against it. But after ten minutes pass, it will be clear who was really the more loving.

The principle here is easy to see: we cannot let the world shape our definition of love. We must let God’s word in the scriptures define for us what is loving. Otherwise, we will fall prey to the deception of the world.

To sum up the first point, certainly love involves more than the keeping of commandments, but it never involves anything less than keeping them. Love goes beyond the keeping of God’s law, but it never goes around the keeping of God’s law. Commandments guard us from inadequate definitions of love and provide us with an objective standard by

which we can test our lives. If we claim to be walking in love but fail to keep God's commandments, then our profession is contradicted by our practice.

The second error is the opposite of the first one. In fact, those of you who really liked my first point are the ones most apt to fall prey to the second error. It is also a mistake to say that keeping commandments is the sum and totality of love. After all, Paul does emphasize in this text that what we owe our neighbor is love, that love fulfills the law, that love sums up the commandments of the law, and that love does no wrong to the neighbor. Love certainly involves the keeping of commandments, but love is more than the keeping of commands. Love also involves the affections and motivations of the heart. One can never claim to be loving while transgressing commandments. But one can be unloving even while keeping commandments, for love involves the affections and motivations of the heart. We see this truth in 1 Cor 13:3, "If I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing" (NASB). Certainly there is no external violation of God's law in giving one's money to the poor or in giving up one's life for another! Indeed, doing these things seems to reflect a profound obedience to God's law. And yet Paul explicitly says here that one may be exceedingly generous to the poor and give up his life for another person and still be unloving! How can one be unloving and give all of one's possessions to the poor or sacrifice one's life so that others may live? Most of us would be inclined to say that anyone who gave us all his money or gave up his life for another must be acting in love. But Paul says, "Not necessarily." Why?

These actions are unloving if the motivation is to gain glory, honor, and praise for ourselves and if they lack affection for the people helped.

No one can be loving who violates the commandments, but we may not be acting in genuine love while keeping the commandments because we may be keeping them to bring honor and praise to ourselves instead of to God (Rom 1:21). True love involves the motivation of the heart and thus it is deeper than the practicing of certain commandments. Keeping God's commands is crucial, but love must retain primacy since our motivation may be idolatrous even in keeping God's commands. We honor God in loving others when our love flows from trust in God (Rom 4:21), for if we do anything apart from faith we sin (Rom 14:23).

If love does not retain primacy over commandments, then we are also in danger of falling into Pharisaism, which is the attempt to make a rule for every conceivable situation. The Pharisees took God's commandments so seriously that they compiled another book, the Mishnah, which described in detail how to keep God's commandments. This book contains 800 pages of detailed regulations. In later Jewish history a further explanation of these 800 pages of rules was compiled, and this consists of more than twenty volumes and is called the Talmud.

Now there is no doubt that we need God's commandments to prevent us from sentimentalizing love. But what is remarkable in reading the New Testament is that love is also described in terms of broad principles and commands. Biblical writers give us enough commands so that they describe how love works itself out, but they do not give us so many that we are lost in a welter of laws that we can

scarcely remember.

It is remarkably easy to impose commandments on others that are not found in the scriptures, nor can they be defended as valid implications from biblical teaching. In doing so we become like the Pharisees in adding laws to the Bible. Here are some examples of imposing laws not found in the scripture that I have heard in my twenty-three years as a Christian. "All Christians *must* home school." "All Christians *should* go to public school." "Wearing beards is wrong and rebellious." "Christians *must* do manual labor and work with their hands." "Christians *must* not eat pork or sugar." "Christians *should* bake fresh bread every day." "All Christians must read the King James Version." There is nothing wrong, of course, in believers making their own private decisions on each of these issues, but to impose them on others and to pretend they are biblical is Pharisaism.

Life is too complex to write down what should be done in every specific situation. In the tremendous variety of life it is impossible to specify what should be done in advance in every case. Scripture does not attempt to delineate for us exactly what we should do in every circumstance. Instead, it says that love is the baseline for our behavior, and love in turn asks what is the best for a neighbor in each situation as it arises.

The difficulty of discerning what is best for the neighbor in terms of love is revealed in Phil 1:9-11: "And this I pray that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ, having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus

Christ, to the glory and praise of God" (NASB). Paul prays that our love will grow in discernment, so that we will choose what is excellent. In the complexity of life we do not always know what is excellent and what is the most loving, and thus we need wisdom to discern what is the most loving action in various circumstances. Should we fire the employee that is doing poor work or give him another chance? How much time should we spend with our families and how much time in other ministry? What is the best way to respond to non-believers with whom we work? Sometimes it seems best to confront them with evil, but often we overlook their evil because we know the root problem is that they are unregenerate. It is not easy to know the best way to respond in each situation. There is no one right and simple answer to these questions. The difficulty of deciding what is the most loving in each circumstance explains why Paul says in Eph 5:10 that we must test what is pleasing to the Lord. This implies that it is not always immediately clear what is the best course of action, what is the most loving thing to do.

The commandments God gives us are like the banks of a river that control the flow of the river. When we violate God's commandments we cause the river to run over the banks, and thus it loses its power and beauty. If we add commandments not found in the scriptures, we widen the banks of the river so that it becomes slow and stagnant and loses its life and vitality. And within the stream of the river there are numerous decisions that need to be made that cannot be specified in advance. The Bible does not anticipate every situation we will encounter. We need the Holy Spirit and wisdom to discern what is best to do as different instances arrive in

our life. Scripture informs us that love is the guideline. But there is no attempt to calculate in advance what we should do in each circumstance of life. We read the scriptures, pray, seek wisdom, and rely upon the Spirit in attempting to discern God's will.

ENDNOTES

¹*Minneapolis Star Tribune*, June 22, 1994.