

Romans 13:8-14**Owe nothing but love**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

As a pastor, I sometimes meet people who feel obligated to tell me why they don't want anything to do with the Christian church. It's always an odd conversation. If they don't want anything to do with it, why do they need to talk to a pastor? But like all of us, they have a deep desire to justify their actions. We all do it, all convince ourselves that our actions are good. Often the excuse given is that the church is full of hypocrites who are holy and pious on Sunday morning and then scoundrels the rest of the week. The snarky response is that there's always room for one more hypocrite in the church. As tempting as that response is, it doesn't actually bear witness to the gospel and it doesn't really show love to a neighbour who might well need it. Remember that Jesus taught us in the parable of the good Samaritan that our 'neighbour' is anyone we encounter in life who needs our help. In this case, they need help seeing through the messiness of our own lives to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

When we do hear those sorts of excuses about church, our first thought should be to consider our own actions, and whether there are things we have done that are outside God's will for our lives. And our second thought should be, how can I love and serve this neighbour in need? In our second reading today, St Paul writes, "Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law" (Romans 13:8, NRSV). This love of one another, understood through the love that Jesus displayed for us on the cross, means giving up our claims to ourselves and our claims over others, however right and just they may seem to us.

This is the self-sacrificial love that Jesus was talking about in last week's gospel reading when he tells us to deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow him. And St Paul says we are to owe no one anything except this love. It's a bit of an odd choice of language, talking about owing nothing except love, something which by definition is freely given and cannot be owed. But this comes directly after a passage on being subject to the governing authorities and paying all your obligations.

For St Paul's original audience, this language of obligation would have been very familiar. To the emperor, they owed honour and allegiance. Unless you were at the top of the social ladder you generally had a rich benefactor to whom you owed money and possessions. Those who were slaves, at the very bottom of the social ladder, owed a lifetime of service, and indeed their very lives, to their master.

Our society is vastly different in many aspects, but still, as citizens of a country, we have obligations to those in authority, because all authority comes from God. And to our fellow citizens, we are to owe only one thing – love. So, the only debt we should leave outstanding is one that can never be paid off, the debt to love one another. This obligation to love has no limit. It's not restricted to those in the family of God but is toward all people. As God so loved the world in giving Jesus, so are we to show love to all whom we meet. Now obviously this love will take different forms depending on the recipient. But regardless of that, St Paul says that by loving one another we have fulfilled the law. And that's a big claim to make. And perhaps a little hard to understand given that Paul has already said that Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.

Although Christ himself is the fulfilment of the law, and although Christians are not under the Mosaic law, St Paul still is concerned that they live moral lives. In this way, we fulfil what is sometimes called the natural law, the law that the gentiles keep even without knowing the law of Moses. And then St Paul actually lists four of the laws given through Moses: you shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not covet. And he says that these and any other commandment are summed up in one: love your neighbour as yourself. And of course, this is in line with what Jesus himself had taught, "all the law and the prophets hang on two commands, love God and love your neighbour as yourself."

If we look at the list of the ten commandments, we see that each one falls into one of these two categories. Not having other gods, not taking the Lord's name in vain, and keeping the Sabbath holy are all ways that we love God. Likewise, honouring our parents, not murdering, not committing adultery, not stealing, not bearing false witness, and not coveting are all ways that we love our neighbour. But, in a technical sense, the Ten Commandments were not given for us. God gave them to the people of Israel as part of the old covenant after he claimed them as his own nation:

I will take you as my people, and I will be your God. You shall know that I am the Lord your God, who has freed you from the burdens of the Egyptians

(Exodus 6:7, NRSV).

It should be quite obvious that we are not Israelites living under the old covenant. And this is part of St Paul's message to the church in Rome. You are not under the law but under grace. And this love of the neighbour is the inevitable response of a heart truly touched by God's grace. And so, God's own love then manifests itself through the loving acts of his children.

But if we are given cause to consider the rightness of our own actions, the ten commandments can be a good point of comparison. They do help us understand both righteousness and love, but need to be read through the cross of Christ. And this is what Luther does in the small catechism. You may recall his oft-repeated question, "What does this mean?" Implying, what does this mean for us, for we who live under the new covenant made in Christ's blood?

We see a good example of this in Luther's explanation of the Sabbath day commandment (and this is probably not the translation you memorised):

We are to fear and love God, so that we do not despise preaching or God's Word, but instead keep that Word holy and gladly hear and learn it.

Because Jesus is the fulfilment of the Sabbath, the application of this commandment to us makes no mention of a particular day or observances. Rather, it's about us gladly receiving Jesus through the preaching of the Word.

Likewise, with the fifth commandment, Jesus has said that to hate your brother is to murder him, and so Luther's explanation says:

We are to fear and love God, so that we neither endanger nor harm the lives of our neighbours, but instead help and support them in all of life's needs.

Not murdering your neighbour is always a good starting point, but our obligation to owe nothing but love means we are called to so much more.

The standard we are called to is only able to be perfectly fulfilled by Christ, but as followers of Christ, the Holy Spirit dwells within us and this true and perfect love of God manifests itself in our lives. And as it does, we fulfil the law. And when we ignore the leading of the Holy Spirit, when our old sinful self takes centre stage, Jesus is still holy and perfect and righteous. When we don't love, Jesus still loves us. When people outside the church look in and see only hypocrisy, God looks in and sees us covered with Jesus' own righteousness.

So, let us pray that God continually draws us back to himself, pouring out his grace and mercy upon us, that his love may shine through again and again. Let us ask God to make us more aware of the opportunities we have to love and serve a neighbour in need. And let us encourage one another in love, that we might live out the gospel in our own lives, showing forgiveness and grace and mercy to each other, and in that way, the light of Christ will shine for all to see. Amen.

May God's peace, which passes all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds safe in the risen Lord Jesus. Amen.