

Romans: The Practice of Righteousness (part 5 of 13)

A Gospel of Love

Romans 13:8-14

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⁸ Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. ⁹ 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." ¹⁰ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law. ¹¹ Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. ¹² The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. ¹³ Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. ¹⁴ But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires. Romans 13:8–14 (ESV)

Do you remember the summit of the book of Romans? On the first Sunday of the year, we reached the "summit" of Romans 8, and I compared it to Arthur's seat in Edinburgh, Scotland. The view from 1,000 feet above sea level is stunning and exhilarating.

I said that summit views – like Romans 8 – are meant to "wow you" and "woo you." They wow you with stunning views, and those views stay with you as you climb down a mountain and re-enter the "flatlands" seeing everything differently.

Months ago we heard "There is therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus!" (Rom 8:1), "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Rom. 8:31), and "... I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Rom. 8:38-39)

It seems like it has been a long time since the summit, doesn't it? But it is that vision that serves as the motivation and the power for Romans 12 and 13. The book of Romans is about righteousness, and the practice of righteousness flows out of a vision of a righteousness through Christ that is "from him, through him, and to him." (Rom. 11:36)

A Christian Mindset Changes Everything

Being a living sacrifice ("I'm Yours, Change Me, Lead Me") is only possible because of the stunning, eternity-altering, and life-changing beauty of what it means to have "no condemnation" over you. Not thinking highly of yourself, being the flavor of Christ, blessing persecutors, and overcoming evil with good (Rom. 12: 3-21) is only possible because of what Christ means to us. Having a right view of

authority and being submissive only works when you love what authority says about God and His common grace. (Rom. 13:1-7)

Your view of God, the cross, and grace affects your life in ways that are very significant. A Christian mindset becomes a lens through which you see everything differently. J.I. Packer in his book *Knowing God* says, “Disregard the study of God, and you sentence yourself to stumble and blunder through life blindfolded . . .”¹ By being captivated by God’s grace, we are able to live very unusually in the world, especially when life is difficult.

The righteousness that God demands is the righteousness that God gives through the person and work of His son, Jesus Christ. And the righteousness that God gives is a righteousness that is to be lived. The righteousness of Romans is meant to be our righteousness in a very practical sense. Knowing who we are in Christ sets us up to know how to live in the world.

Our text today, Romans 13:8-14, is another application of what it means to be a living sacrifice and to have a Christian mindset. We are called to walk in love and to walk in the light.

Walk in Love

In verses 8-10 we have a beautiful and helpful summation of the Christian life. It is needed at this point in the text because in Romans 13:1-7, Paul addressed the complicated issue of the Christian’s response to authority, especially the government. He used broad and sweeping statements like “let every person be subject to the governing authorities” (13:1) and “pay to all what is owed them: taxes to who taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.” (Rom. 13:7). He did not get into the nuances of civil disobedience because the point of Romans 12-13 is to give you general principles by which to live.

I think these chapters are trying to help us get our mindset and our attitude right because the challenging nuance of living in the world requires knowing where the “Biblical North Star” is. I did not get into all the exceptions as it relates to the civil disobedience because I think those situations must be worked out with wisdom and be guided by the principles of these chapters.

In other words, if you don’t know who you are in Christ, if you are not committed to passionately pursuing a Christian mindset, and if you have an attitude issue with authority, you have no business talking about civil disobedience.

Now Paul gives us another concept by which we are to live, and it is really important. He continues the theme of “owe” from verse 7 and links it with the concept of love. Paul’s aim here is to show us the importance of love as the most basic way that a Christian lives.

Verse 8 starts with a principle: **Always walk in love.** According to 13:7, believers are to fully pay their taxes so that they meet their civic obligations. They are to fulfill their requirements as citizens. Whether it is taxes, revenue, respect, or honor, they are to pay what is owed. This is not implying that all debt is necessarily sinful or wrong (although greed funded through over-indebtedness surely is).

¹ <http://www.radical.net/blog/2015/06/do-we-know-the-god-we-are-serving/>

Instead, Paul is saying that we should fulfill our obligations, but that we will never be able to be free from the obligation to love people.

Your tax bill may be marked “paid,” such that you do not need to pay any more, but love is different. There is an inexhaustible requirement to love people. The Christian has an obligation to love that never ends. Always walk in love.

This is a very important guiding principle. In the midst of complicated situations, new circumstances, and nuanced practical decisions, those who have the mind of Christ are guided by biblical love. I’m adding the word “biblical” here on purpose because our culture has often taken the word “love” and applied it in ways that violates the morality of Christianity. Biblical love is loving people the way that God has loved us – with grace and truth. Biblical love balances grace and truth in a way that is compassionate, accepting, and kind while preserving what is true, right, and moral. And we need Christians today who understand what biblical love really is.

After Paul identifies this principle, he continues to show how central it is to living as a Christian. There are three reasons:

1. Love is the fulfillment of the Law

The Law is God’s standard for behavior. It represents the essence of how God wants people to live, and verse 8 states that to love another person is to fulfill the law. In other words, love is the essence, the heart, and the center of what God desires and of true obedience.

What is basic obedience? Love. What is the essence of morality? Love. What is supposed to be the chief characteristic of a Christian? Love. What is the expression of the gospel? Love.

Prior to the New Testament and prior to the life of Jesus, the people of God viewed the Law as the ultimate expression of obedience. If you were to ask them, “What does true obedience look like?”, a genuinely righteous person would have said, “Keeping the Law.” If you lived during this time period, obedience to the Law would have been your focus, your prayer for your children, what you looked for in a future spouse, and what the community of believers focused upon. God-fearing and law-keeping were synonymous terms.

In Romans 13, Paul shows us that you could replace “law-keeping” with “love.” In the same way that keeping the law was the hallmark of a true believer, so now walking in love is the essence of true obedience because love is at the heart of law-keeping.

2. Love is the summary of the Law

To make the point even clearer, Paul uses four specific commandments from the Ten Commandments as an example. The prohibitions against adultery, murder, stealing, and coveting are all violations of love. Taking someone’s spouse, life, goods, and desiring what someone has are all ways of not living in love. Each violation is different, but each is the same species of not loving our neighbor as ourselves.

But Paul doesn't stop with the four commandments. He uses those to extend his point even further by including "any other command." In other words, not loving your neighbor is more than a summary of four of the Ten Commandments; not loving your neighbor is the essence of any commandment violation.

Positively, this verse means that Paul is elevating loving one's neighbor as the most foundational summary of what true obedience really is. Therefore, a believer could generally boil obedience down to one command: Love your neighbor as yourself.

3. Acting in love is true obedience

When you read verse 10, it sounds like a repetition of verse 8, but it is more than that. It serves as both summary of these three points and an emphasis on continuing action. In verse 8 the text reads "the one who loves another has fulfilled the law." But in verse 10 it reads "love is the fulfilling of the law." The leaning of verse 10 is toward active obedience. As we act in love, we are fulfilling the law.

Therefore, if a follower of Jesus wants to embrace true obedience, then he or she must walk in love. The calling and mission of those who have a Christian mindset is to live in the world with love in our actions.

There are a number of things that I want to say by way of application here. This is a very important section in Romans, and this is a critical time in our culture to live out what Paul is saying.

First, notice that love is more than an emotional feeling. It expresses itself in tangible actions – like not committing adultery, not murdering, not stealing, and not coveting. It looks like not doing your neighbor wrong. Having a Christian mindset is more than just thinking the right thoughts and feeling right feelings. It is doing the right things in light of the right feeling, in light of right thinking.

Do your actions fit the definition of love? Is your Christian love more feeling than action? Is your Christian mindset leading you to talk differently, live differently? Do you "do something" with your Christian walk? Is your walk with Christ more about intention or direction?

Second, I'm sure there are some of you who have had really bad experiences with "unloving Christians." You may be here because someone loved you enough to invite you to church today, and yet you have a guard up when it comes to Christianity. I get it. But you need to know that broken and sinful people are the reason why Christ came to die for our sins. Christians are still imperfect. They mess up, and they do not talk or act consistently all the time. But you need to know that Christ died for sinners, and He loves imperfect Christians. The hope of the gospel is that people can be forgiven of their sins, and even after coming to Jesus, God still covers their imperfections – even yours.

Third, if you are a follower of Jesus, do not underestimate the importance of a life marked by love when some kind of religious opposition or persecution comes. 1 Peter 2:12 gives us an important and timely word:

¹² Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation. 1 Peter 2:12 (ESV)

Peter's message is to live in such a way that even if people speak against you because of what you believe, they will also be very aware of your good works, your godly character, and your love for people.

So mark it down somewhere that everything you say and everything you do really, really matters. Think of it like a credibility bank account. You and I need to be the kind of people that even if people disagree with our worldview, they will have respect and admiration for our loving actions which have proven our Christlikeness. You want to live such that people will say, "I don't agree with you, but I cannot deny that you have loved and cared for me."

Owe no one anything, except to love one another. Walk in love.

Walk in the Light

The first point focused on a summary of what the Christian life is all about. The second aspect relates to the urgency of the issue. Paul wants us to really listen to what he is saying here. Verses 11-14 serve both as context for what he is saying and an amplifier. There is a moral urgency present in these verses. Christians love consistently and live morally.

Why? - "It's Time"

Paul seeks to motivate Christians toward action by reminding them about the kind of time in which they live. Notice all the references to time with a sense of urgency:

- v. 11a – "you know the time"
- v. 11b – "the hour has come to wake from sleep"
- v. 11c – "salvation is nearer to us now"
- v. 12 – "the night is far gone; the day is at hand"

Paul is using this kind of language to highlight two things. First, he wants to remind believers about the context in which they live. It is important for believers to know the cultural and historical landscape around us because we can forget the big picture message of the Bible, what theologians call the eschatological vision or what others might call the trajectory of history.

The time in which we are living is what the Bible calls the "last days." This is the time period between the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus and his second coming. Jesus told us that during these days, there will be seasons of opposition to the gospel. Matthew 24 talks about wars and rumors of wars, nations rising against nation, famines, earthquakes, persecutions and trials of many kinds. Matthew 24:11-12 gives us a sober warning:

¹¹ And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. ¹² And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold. Matthew 24:11–12 (ESV)

In the midst of this increasingly hostile culture, believers are told to wait for and hasten the day of the Lord (2 Peter 3:12) because we are waiting for Jesus to return and for "new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells." (2 Peter 3:13) In other words, the followers of Jesus see this world

through the lens of what is to come. We are waiting for the fulfillment of our salvation, and that is why Paul refers to salvation being nearer than when we first believed. Every day that passes is not just another day that is completed; it is one day closer to Jesus' return.

Paul and Peter talk about our "time" in this kind of language because it is easy to forget where human history and our lives are headed. We can become numb to the culture around us or we become too attached to it by loving it. It is very easy to forget why we are here, and what human history is really all about. Familiarity can become dangerous.

I have had the scary privilege of teaching all three of our boys how to drive. Every stage of a teenager learning to drive is scary even though they are different. The first few months everyone is alert, looking around, and very nervous. But it is the second stage that I find to be particularly scary – the stage where they are good enough and familiar enough with driving that they can "check-out" and not drive defensively. Overconfidence or being too comfortable are just as dangerous as inexperience – maybe even more so.

This passage reminds us about the "time" in which we live. For all the beauty, enjoyment, pleasurable experiences, and familiarity, our world is broken, deeply flawed, increasingly hostile, and in rebellion against God. Every funeral, every natural disaster, and every moral scandal remind us that this world is not safe, and it needs to be fixed.

Paul wants us to "wake up" to this reality. He wants us to wake up from moral drowsiness. Part of being conformed to the world is not allowing a moral sleepiness to set in (see also Eph. 5:14 and 1 Thess. 5:6-7). We can become hypnotized by the spell and the attraction of the world's system. We can be lulled to sleep by the common and soothing slide of morality. Or you can fall prey to the "mob mentality" where you are just going along with the crowd, and as you look back at what you did, you find yourself say, "What was I thinking!?" And that's the problem. You weren't. You were sleeping!

This text calls us to "wake-up" to the reality of who we are, what kind of world we live in, what could happen, and what will happen! And the reason we are called to "wake-up" is because of the time that we live in.

In August we are going to talk about the ordinary Christian life, and part of the burden for that series is for you to see that God has supplied the spiritual resources that awaken us to who we are, what our mission is, and what it means to be the church. I'm spending a lot of personal time in 1 and 2 Peter right now, and it is striking how Peter calls suffering believers to "prepare their minds for action...be sober-minded" (1 Peter 1:13) and to "arm yourselves with the same way of thinking" (like the way Jesus thought) (1 Peter 4:1).

A spiritual awakening happens as we ingest the Word, pray with passion, live in community, memorize the Word, give generously, serve selflessly, and mortify sin ruthlessly. "Waking up" is not only major moments of radical change; it is also – maybe even more about - thousands of mornings where you set your sights on being a living sacrifice that day.

After the Fresh Encounter Prayer Service tonight we will talk about some things to consider as it relates to same-sex marriage. And for all the challenges that this and other cultural issues are bringing to Evangelical Christians, I'm thrilled with spiritual clarity and a sense of urgency that it is creating in the lives of believers. I've told our Elders two things recently: 1) to not be conversant in these cultural issues, especially regarding homosexuality, is to embrace Elder malpractice, and 2) this is a great time to be Elder or a Pastor. The challenges around us create great opportunities to think carefully, speak intelligently, and engage wisely. We have a new opportunity to platform the gospel, if our hearts are not overly attached to comforts and safety of American culture.

There is a new level of clarity emerging as to what it means to be Christian. We need to "wake-up" to what time we are living in, who we are and what our mission is all about. Don't be spiritually or morally drowsy!

What? - Be Different

The second aspect of walking in the light relates to our conduct. Paul makes the idea of walking in love and walking in the light very practical, and it should be. The bottom-line is that how a follower of Jesus lives his or her life really matters, and this is especially true when the pressure gets more intense and the battle-lines of culture are clearer.

Christianity is lived one day, one decision, one choice at a time. And every moment, every decision and every day matters. You can blow years of gospel witness and any future influence so quickly.

Verse 12 says, "So then..." in light of what Paul has just said about the time in which we live, there are some actions that need to be characteristic of our lives. What does that look like?

First, he gives a general principle: "Let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light." (Rom. 13:12). When believers understand who they are and when they present themselves as living sacrifices, it means that they renounce sinful actions that are "works of darkness," and they take up or put on the armor of light. Throughout the New Testament believers are called to "put off" the wrong actions and "put on" the right actions (see Colossians 3:5-17, Galatians 5:16-24 and Ephesians 4:17-5:21). And these good actions are part of our battle in the world and what it means to be "in Christ."

How do we wage culture war? By treasuring Christ, loving people deeply, speaking graciously, and doing what is right. Our best weapon against the onslaught of the enemy is personal righteousness. So be different. Don't be sinfully angry. Weep over the condition of the world and recommit yourself to godliness.

Secondly, Paul lists six particular sin issues. He often gives lists of common sinful actions in order to apply what he is saying (see Galatians 5:19-21, Ephesians 5:3-5, 1 Timothy 1:9-10). Paul is not afraid (and neither should we be afraid) at the right moment to carefully and humbly say, "this is immoral and wrong." But here's the thing: we have no credibility to say that unless we are living righteous lives.

Paul seems to address sin issues in three different but overlapping realms: social, sexual and relational. He calls believers to have social lives that are not marked by mob sensuality and drunkenness. Believers are to be controlled by the Spirit not by sexual passion or the effects of too much alcohol. In the midst of a culture that is out of control, believers are to be different.

From a sexual standpoint, believers are not to be marked by sexual immorality and sensuality. Those who are married and those who are single should both embrace sexual purity. This kind of righteousness is becoming more and more unusual. It may even feel embarrassing because of how “old school” people treat you when you tell them about your commitment to sexual purity. But can I just remind you that your battle for purity is not just about you? It’s not just about your morality or not feeling guilty. The issue relates to the gospel and the witness of the church – our church – in the world. So keep fighting.

Finally, Paul mentions relational sins of quarreling and jealousy. I’m so grateful that he includes these here because it reminds us that righteousness needs to be applied in every arena down to one-on-one relationships. Our world is filled with quarreling, back-biting, gossip, jealousy, and rivalry. No aspect of society is untouched. How unusual it would be to have people who are not like this because they treasure the mind and the life of Christ! Let me say the same thing about relationships that I said about sexuality. Remember, your quarreling and jealousy are not just about you. There is more at stake here!

What is Paul’s conclusion? Verse 14 sums up everything: “But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.” (Rom. 13:14). What does this mean? This entire passage is calling believers to embrace the mindset and the life of Jesus. It calls us to be like him in how we think, what we feel, and how we act. It exhorts us to actively “put on” him as opposed to putting on the sinful deeds of the flesh.

What’s more it means that we orient our lives away from things that provide fuel for the anti-God, anti-righteousness mindset that is embedded in our culture. And instead that we set our moral GPS toward becoming like Christ, and we make the turns to the left or right that are need to get us there by His grace.

It means that if you boil the Christian life down, it really is about a people who have been transformed by the grace of God through Jesus Christ that they walk in love and they walk in the light.

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