

THE ROMANS SERIES

***“LOVE: THE KEY TO
OBEDIENCE”***

Romans 13:8-10

STUDY (37)



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INTRODUCTION

The world that we live in is not one that could be characterized by love. We may be more educated, wealthy, and with greater technology than ever before, yet the world is not a more loving place to live in.

In October the whole of China was shocked at the callousness of their society when a toddler was run over by a van. 18 persons walked past the stricken child allowing another vehicle to then come and run over her a second time. However, when a society is built on the principle of selfishness and educated by a Darwinian philosophy that life is purposeless and only the survival of the fittest succeed that is the result. The only amazing thing is that this does not happen more often.

In Ephesians 4:19 the apostle Paul writes about the unsaved heathen world, “*Who being past feeling have given themselves over unto lasciviousness, to work all uncleanness with greediness.*” He then adds in the next verse, “*But ye have not so learned Christ.*”

In a world of materialism, selfishness, violence, and indifference the Christian is called to swim against the tide and walk a different path. We have “*not so learned Christ.*” Love for others must be part of our lives. D L Moody once observed that, “A man may be a good doctor without loving his patients; a good lawyer without loving his clients; a good geologist without loving science; but he cannot be a good Christian without love.”

OVERVIEW

After Paul has dealt in detail with the relationship between the duties of a believer to the individual (Romans 12:3-21) and the state (Romans 13:1-7), he concludes and summarizes in v8-10 what he has been saying in all these areas. As he does so, Paul will emphasise that the key to exercising our duties is to be motivated by love.

This is not a new thought. For Romans 12:1-2 is simply loving the Lord our God with all of our heart, soul, and mind whereas Romans 12:3-21 is loving our neighbour as ourselves. The order is also significant, as we cannot love our fellow man the right way until we love God the right way. Now in Romans 13:8-10, Paul looks at the more negative side of love – what love will not do. He has already focused on what love does in Romans 12:3-21.

Every Christian should be driven to act by unconditional and unselfish *agape* love. The apostle will show that this love is more than just a feeling, but manifests itself in actions to our fellow man. This is based on an OT principle from Leviticus 19:18 which Paul will cite in v9 to back up his case. This is the single most quoted verse in the NT (9 times). Sadly it has been misquoted, misused, and misunderstood by many believers.

(1) THE PRINCIPLE OF LOVE (v8)

The basic principle of love to govern these relationships is stated in v8a by Paul, “*Owe no man any thing, but to love one another.*” The tense is of this verb “*owe*” is the present continuous imperative, which in this context forbids the continuance of an action already going on.

This Greek word translated “*owe*” has diverse meanings including monetary and moral obligations. So Paul is commanding, not suggesting, that his readers do not continue owing a debt i.e. ensure that you don’t remain in debt by properly discharging them.

BORROWING AND LENDING?

There are some writers who assume that the expression here, “*Owe no man any thing*” means that it is wrong for a believer to borrow or lend to another. This is an erroneous interpretation that can be demonstrated from other Scriptures. It was God who sanctioned borrowing and lending (Exod. 22:25; Lev. 25:35-37; Deut. 15:7-9; Neh. 5:7; Psa. 15:5; 37:21, 26; Ezek. 22:12; Matt. 5:42; Luke 6:34). Indeed we are expressly told, “*A good man sheweth favour, and lendeth: he will guide his affairs with discretion*” (Psa. 112:5).

The principle that Paul is setting forth here must be guided by the context of this chapter and this book. In Romans 13:7 he instructed, “*Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honour to whom honour.*” So in light of those duties Paul immediately instructs in the next verse, “*Owe no man any thing.*” In other words, what duties we owe to the state must be discharged properly and promptly. Once you miss a scheduled payment, then you come under the enforcement of this passage.

Notwithstanding, I believe, there are wider applications. This is also a warning to every individual, every businessman, and every church to live within their means, always remembering that the borrower is slave to the lender (Prov. 22:7). They should not rashly take on debts, when there is no reasonable expectation that they can meet the contracted repayment schedules. The Lord Jesus Christ points out that this is simply common sense, “*For which of you, intending to build a tower, sitteth not down first, and counteth the cost, whether he have sufficient to finish it?*” (Luke 14:28).

In a day when credit cards and loan companies proliferate, we need to be careful with our finances. Before you commit to borrowing, think it through carefully and prayerfully because your testimony will be greatly harmed if you are unable to meet your debts. This principle is entirely consistent with Scripture, “*The wicked borroweth, and payeth not again: but the righteous sheweth mercy, and giveth*” (Psa. 37:21). The father of John Wesley, Samuel Wesley, who was an Anglican minister, had great difficulty handling money and was regularly in debt. He was even imprisoned for not paying his debts and had to seek the help of the Bishop of York to obtain a pardon from debtor’s prison. This lifestyle brought great shame to his family and the gospel cause.

GOSPEL DEBT

Now, there is one debt we are allowed to be perpetually under. Paul tells us this debt is, “*but to love one another.*” This includes all men from whatever background that God brings us into contact or knowledge of. Paul gives no exceptions. An example of this debt is the gospel debt Paul owed, “*I am debtor both to the Greeks, and to the Barbarians; both to the wise, and to the unwise*” (Rom. 1:14). All of us feel the obligations of this debt, as we are debtors to God’s grace.

Martyn Lloyd Jones compared a believer who refuses to pay back some of this debt with an interesting analogy. He compared it to a man who had spent all his money and energy seeking a cure for a fatal disease he had. Then one day he met a stranger who directed him to a place where a person could freely cure him. After he was wonderfully cured, the same man walked the streets willfully ignoring those he passed by who were stricken by the same disease that nearly killed him. Lloyd Jones rightly argues that such a person is reprehensible. Yet so many of us do the same, when we who have been saved by free grace, but refuse to even point dying unbelievers to the cure.

The gospel love debt is one that we can never discharge. We must be paying it back daily, yet we always owe more of it. You may pay off your taxes, credit card bills or your outstanding mortgage, but this supreme debt is one that abides with us on this

planet. It is the only un-discharged debt that God permits us to be in up to our necks!

Paul then tells us why we are commanded to perpetually “*love one another,*” as he says, “*for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law.*” (v8b) The key to living out God’s holy moral law is tied up in love to our fellow man. Law and love are not two opposing forces but two sides of the same coin. There is love in law and law in love!

This word “*fulfilled*” here is greater than simply obeying. You can outwardly or mechanically obey the moral law, but to fulfill the law means to not just live up to the letter of it but the spirit of it. The spirit of the law is tied up and motivated by love – it is the oil that lubricates the mechanics of the acts of obedience. Paul gives us an example of the worthlessness in outward obedience only, “*And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing.*” (1 Cor. 13:3).

(2) THE PRACTICE OF LOVE (v9-10)

Paul then shifts from giving us the principle of love that must guide our life to illustrating how it should work itself out in practice in v9-10. We do not simply tell our children to be good and hope that they will do so. Rather we spell out in detail how they are to be good. Likewise, the apostle knows that we need to understand the outworking of this *agape* love.

True biblical *agape* love is not some mushy sentimental movie scene or some pious platitude that we lace into our conversation on Sundays. Love is something that works itself out in actions at home, work or in the neighbourhood towards real people. It is the door by which we pass from selfishness to service for others. Paul lists some examples of this in the great chapter of love of 1 Corinthians 13,

Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.
(1 Cor. 13:4-7)

In the same manner, Paul cites in Romans 13 some of the second table of the Decalogue to give tangible examples of how *agape* love should be manifest in our conduct to our fellow man, “*For this, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Thou shalt not covet; and if there be any other commandment*” (v9a).

Jesus Christ told us to love the Lord our God with “*all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.*” (Matt 22:37) This is a summary of our duty to God under the first table of the Ten Commandments. Paul argues that our duties under the second division can also be summarized, “*it is briefly comprehended in this saying, namely, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.*” (Romans 13:9) This is no new revelation, as Christ taught the same in Matthew 22:39.

So, in seeking to follow the teachings of the second division of the law we are living out what it means to truly love our fellow man. Love is lawful and order. It is never lawless. For instance, to love my neighbour means I will never commit adultery with his wife. And to love my neighbour also means that I will not seek to harm him physically in murder or to plunder his goods. Love will never permit the things the Old Testament Law forbade. Paul is driving home the point here that love is not just a matter of words, but what we do as, “*Love worketh no ill to his neighbour: therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.*” (v10)

COMMON ERRORS

Now, I must observe two points in passing here:

(1) This is not a NT revelation of truth that we are to love our neighbour. Many dispensationalists argue that we are no longer required to live up to the moral law, but we are simply to love our neighbour as ourselves. This latter requirement they set off against the moral law of the Decalogue in a spurious kind of “law vs love” confrontation. However, when both Christ and Paul instructed us to, “*love thy neighbour as thyself;*” they were not introducing some new belief under the new covenant. Rather they were citing the spirit of the law from the OT, “*Thou shalt not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself: I am the LORD*” (Lev. 19:18). The requirement to, “*love thy neighbour as thyself;*” and to follow the moral law’s duties to our fellow man can never be separated, as they are one and the same.

(2) This requirement to, “*love thy neighbour as thyself;*” is not teaching that we need to love ourselves more in order to rightly know how we should love our neighbour. This is a typical false exegesis by charismatics to justify their health and wealth pursuit for themselves. But our problem is not that we need to love ourselves more - we do that only too well, as selfish self-centred creatures. William Hendrickson well notes, “it is a certain thing that a person will love himself, and it is also certain that he will do so in spite of the fact that the self he loves has many faults!” Our need is to stop focusing on ourselves, and start loving our fellow man at least that much.

The way we love our neighbours truly reveals our love for God. The way we act towards others is therefore a good measure of our spiritual state – a kind of spiritual thermometer. It is somewhat easier to fake our love for God before men by acting in a spiritual way in church, but it much more difficult to feign love for our fellow man. Our actions condemn us.

Now, some might say that what Paul is requiring here is impossible, even for the best of believers. Paul, however, has not plucked v8-10 out of the air. The demands here are tied into a life that knows the doctrines of Romans 1-11 and then puts them into practice toward God (Romans 12:1-2) and then toward his fellow man (Romans 12:3-13:7). He is describing a life under the control and empowerment of the Spirit of God as, “*the fruit of the Spirit is love*” (Gal. 5:22) for “*they that are in the flesh cannot please God*” (Romans 8:8).

CONCLUSION

(1) If as v10 states, “*Love worketh no ill to his neighbour*” – is this true for you? What is the focus of your thoughts and actions? Is it one focused on self, or is it one that lovingly seeks to meet the needs of others? Are you seeking good for your neighbour rather than evil as, “*Love worketh no ill to his neighbour.*” What evidence is there for this?

In Luke 10, Jesus Christ was asked by a lawyer, “*And who is my neighbour?*” The Master unfolded the story of the Good Samaritan who showed his love for the stricken Jewish man by ministering to his needs. Then He pointedly asked, “*Which now of these three, thinkest thou, was neighbour unto him that fell among the thieves?*” When the lawyer replied, “*He that shewed mercy on him.*” Then the Saviour commanded him, “*Go, and do thou likewise.*” (Luke 10:36-37).

As individuals, we owe a debt of love to every single person we come in contact with. Today, as we contemplate the great needs of those around us, the same command

echoes down through the centuries to us, “*Go, and do thou likewise.*”

(2) Unbeliever – You cannot know this love in your life until you know the love of Christ in your heart. That only comes by being justified by free grace. May God fill you with His love.