

**First Presbyterian Church**  
**Romans 13:8-14, “Love: It’s the Law”**  
**by Pastor Matt Johnson, 9/6/2020**

I have to say this: I really miss you all. I miss meeting here with you for worship,  
I miss seeing you in the hallways and for lunches  
and I miss gathering in our homes  
and all the things that mean so much to us.  
And I know that you miss it, too.

When our hearts are hurting because we miss each other,  
that is a sign that we love each other.

When we argue about what to do to fix the coronavirus,  
or when we make great efforts to meet safely with friends or family,  
those are all signs that we have love.

But then there’s the law.

There are laws about gathering in large numbers,  
laws about wearing masks indoors with large groups,  
laws about how much space we have to give one another.

If we follow all these laws, are we not stifling the love that we have for each other?  
And if we let our love lead the way and do what we want,  
are we not taking great risk by breaking these laws?

What do we follow: love or the law?

The Apostle Paul wrote a long to the church in Rome,  
and in what we call the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter, he asks this same question.  
What is the relationship between love and the law?

But the law Paul is referring to isn’t a law handed down by a governor  
or a legislature – it’s the laws of God handed down to Israel by Moses.

And the church in Rome was having the same conversation as other churches:  
Do we need to keep these laws in order to live within the will of God?  
Is that what marks us out as people who ... love God?

Well some said, “Yes! This is tradition.

Without a connection to those who came before us,  
we’ll never know who we are.

The Scripture says the laws of God are right and just and true  
and put us on a path toward holiness and goodness.

You’re crazy if you think we don’t need that.  
More than crazy – you’re evil!”

And others said, “Hold on a minute! The law doesn’t *make* us holy or good –  
it just shows us when we fail to be holy or good.

We believe that Jesus Christ died on the cross to set us free  
from sin and death, and so all we need to do is love Jesus,  
and on all these other matters we are free to do as we like.

If you don’t think Jesus death accomplished anything, you’re crazy.  
More than crazy – you’re evil!”

This argument about the law and love was painful and difficult  
because it was also about racial reconciliation.

You see these churches had Jews in them who had been scattered  
across the land when Israel was taken over.  
And these Jews believed that Jesus was the Messiah!

But there were also Gentiles in these churches  
who didn’t grow up with Jewish traditions.

They believe in Jesus, too, but they who wanted to live  
as their culture lived, eating the food they ate,  
and for the boys, keeping all the parts of their body  
that God gave them when they were born!

So a lot was at stake here. This was about what it means to be someone  
who follows Jesus, and about whose culture is accepted or rejected.

Implicit in all of that is the character and goodness of God:  
Is God someone who is for our people or their people?  
And is God someone whose laws are eternal,  
or can they be done away with?

And—Is God someone who keeps promises, or breaks them?  
Because God made a lot of promises to the Jews,  
not as much to the Gentiles.

There was a lot of pain. And a lot of love. On both sides.

That's why Paul wrote this letter to the church in Rome.

And that's what he's dealing with in the passages we'll be looking at this week and next week.

He starts out this passage with an interesting figure of speech about debt.

What's your philosophy on debt?

Are you a balanced budget person,  
or someone who is okay with deficit spending?

Well I've got news for you. It's clear that the Apostle Paul is a fiscal conservative:

"Let no debt remain outstanding."

So take that, tax and spend liberals!

BUT! When you continue reading it quickly becomes equally clear that the Apostle Paul is a bleeding heart liberal apart from financial matters.

"Let no debt remain outstanding *except the continuing debt to love one another.*"

So take that, you heartless conservatives!

We have a debt of love...toward one another.

Where does this continuing love debt come from?

The real debt of love that we owe is not to each other, but to God.

Paul writes earlier in this letter to the Romans (5:8),

"God demonstrates his own love for us in this:

While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

That is love – to sacrifice life for the sake of people

who are actively turning away from you.

What love God has for us – not just in terms of *feelings*,  
but demonstrated in Christ's death and resurrection.

While we were yet sinners.

So if Paul had written here, "Let no debt remain outstanding except the continuing debt to love God in Christ Jesus," we would have exactly what we expected.

But instead he says the love debt is "to love one another."

I think the concept of transference is at work here.

Think about the word of Jesus in the Gospels,  
“As I have loved you, love one another.”

Principle of transference is this:

God’s actions toward us provides basis for our action to others.

If God has forgiven us, so we ought to ... forgive others!

And so in the same way, if God has so loved us, then we have ...  
not just an opportunity to be nice, not just an option if we feel like it,  
but a *continuing debt* of love to one another.

Why? Because of the on-going demonstration of God’s love for you.

This is why I get upset with the demonization of human beings  
made in the image of God when they are aligned with political efforts  
we disagree with. I have a continuing debt of love even toward those  
who are doing things I believe to be very harmful. Why?

Because while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

All of that is essential foundation for the next phrase:  
“For whoever loves others has fulfilled the law.”

Now we’re getting to that question I opened up with:  
What are we supposed to do, emphasize loving each other  
or obeying the law?

The surprise answer is that when you love, you fulfill the law.  
(An important caveat being that the law in question must be just!)

When it comes to the Law of Moses, Paul doesn’t say,  
“Forget about it, it doesn’t matter, Jesus got rid of it, God was just kidding.”

A lot of Christians think that’s what the New Testament  
says about the 10 Commandments. It never does.

Paul says, “When you service the ongoing debt of love to each other  
that comes from God’s sacrificial love toward you,  
then simply by nature *you will also be fulfilling the Law of Moses.*”

They are not, in the end, opposed to each other.

Paul lists some of the 10 Commandments,  
and then borrows from the Jesus playbook.

Paul says, **“Love your neighbor as your self.**

**Love does no harm to its neighbor.**

**Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.”**

Now listen to Jesus in Matthew 22,

**‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul  
and with all your mind.’**

**This is the first and greatest commandment.**

**And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’**

**All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”**

Either Paul had access to the teachings of Jesus before the Gospel of Matthew  
was written, or they were both inspired by the same Spirit of Love.

Either way, the parallel is remarkable,  
and the conclusion is that love *is* the law.

The second half of the passage

speaks about how this love for each other is expressed:

By recognizing that with the arrival of Christ  
a new day is dawning on humanity.

And since the sunrise is on the way,

why live as though it is night? Don’t run around naked,  
put on your clothes!

We clothe ourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ.

We protect ourselves by living in the daytime that Jesus brings.

Now the sunrise has been a lot longer coming that Paul seems to expect.

He says in v. 11, **“our salvation is nearer than we first believed!”**

It’s almost here. In other words, Jesus is about to return!

It’s hard to keep that level of anticipation up nearly 2000 years later.

But what is true is that none of us know what tomorrow brings,  
or when our last day will be.

So live today as one who owes a continuing debt of love to your neighbor.

Live today as one who has been secured by the costly love of God.

If that’s true, then you have nothing to worry about,

and you can direct the overflow of God’s love to others.

When we do that, the law of God is fulfilled.

So let us love one another. After all, it’s the law.