

Two Reasons for Right Living

Romans 13:8-14

Series: Romans, Spring 2023: Walking Out the Truth

Preaching Date: April 16, 2023

Text: Romans 13:8-14

Worship: The Hour is Near

Key Sentence:

Love and anticipation call us to right living

Outline:

I. Love for neighbor fulfills the law (Romans 13:8-10)

II. Anticipation of the day calls us from deeds of darkness (Romans 13:11-13)

Romans 13:8–14 Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. ⁹For 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.” ¹⁰Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.

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Two Reasons for Right Living Romans 13:8-14

I'm sure most of us remember the rescue of the 12 boys and their soccer team coach from the Tham Luang cave in northern Thailand. They entered the cave on June 23, 2018 after a practice session and were trapped by heavy rain that flooded the cave system, blocking their way out. They retreated to a section of high ground. They were missed in less than 24 hours, but because of heavy currents and continual rains, penetrating the cave took days and days. Finally, on July 2nd, 10 days after they entered the cave, two of the world's most experienced cave divers, Brits John Volanthen and Rick Stanton found the group alive about 2.5 mi from the cave mouth.

You've all seen this video. "And then the moment that seems like a miracle." "We found them. We found them." "Almost 10 days since they first entered the cave." "Raise your hand." "Thank you. Thank you." "How many of you?" "Thirteen." "Thirteen. Brilliant." "Yeah. Yeah." "No, not today. Not today. Just two of us. We have to dive." "The diver says not today." "We are coming. It's okay. Many people are coming. Many, many people. We are the first. Many people come." "What day." "Tomorrow" "No, no, no, what day is it, they are asking." "Monday." "Okay, but one week and Monday." "You have been here ten days, ten days." "You are very strong. Very strong."

Rescue organizers discussed various options for extracting the group, including whether to teach them basic underwater diving skills to enable their early rescue, or wait until a new entrance to the cave was found or drilled, or wait for the floodwaters to subside by the end of the monsoon season several months later. After days of pumping water from the cave system and a respite from rain, the rescue teams hastened to get the group out of the cave before the monsoon brought additional downpours and was predicted to start around July 11. Between 8 and 10 July, all 12 boys and their coach were rescued from the cave by an international team.

That's the basic story. Everyone involved, of course, has done interviews or books since then, and I've tried to read or listen to a bunch of them, but the way I want to use the story doesn't depend on all that, but on very simple observations. Basically I see two things at work in the group of thirteen sitting there deep in the cave. The first is love for one another and the second is hope, or anticipation that somebody was going to come to rescue them. It was these two things that enabled them to hold it together for that ten days and then the days followed. Love for one another and anticipation.

Our text today, Romans 13:8-10, says the same two things. Remember, we're in the application section of Romans so that much of what Paul says is about the practice rather than the theory of Christian living, though all his words are theologically grounded. In Romans 12:1-2 we talked about being living sacrifices, and not being conformed to the pattern of this world. In verses 3 to 8 of that chapter we talked about having a right view of self which allows us to use the spiritual gifts that God gives in the service of others. Then the rest of Romans 12 was a long list of ethical commands, which included the command to love one another, but also many ways to put that command into practice. Just before Easter we talked about the practical issue of submission to governing authorities, and we ended that message with Paul's command to "pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, and honor to whom honor is owed." Now, in verse 8, Paul generalizes the thought by teaching us to pay all of our debts except for the ongoing obligation to love one another. So, verses 8 to 10 expand on the law of love, but then verses 11 to 14 call us to live the Christian life out of anticipation of the Lord's return. So we see in these verses that both love and anticipation call us to right living.

Have you ever read, or seen the movie "the Lord of the flies?" In it a group of boys is stranded on an unknown island, and they quickly degenerate into a barbaric society of murder, hate and division. One remarkable thing about those boys in the cave is that they did not deteriorate. They stuck together. They worked together. They took care of each other, and in a very real way they loved each other. Part of the reason was their coach, who encouraged them to calmness, peace and hope. "He loved them more than himself," a woman from the town said shortly after the ordeal. But they all loved. If you look at pictures after the event, you can see these boys, who ranged from 11 to 16 years old simply loved each other. Therefore they treated each other right. They respected and cared for each other. One who led by example was the boy you heard speaking English in video. Adun is a Christian, a strong believer, and very active in the Mae Sai Grace Church. He prayed to Jesus and received peace and hope in the cave and has been consistently giving God the glory for their rescue.

The first thing that Paul tells us in today's text, verses 8 to 10, is to obey the law of love. Verse 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.*

There is one debt which will always remain outstanding, because we can never fully pay it, and that is our duty to love. We can never stop loving somebody and say, "I have loved enough." Some people twist this to make it a concession to lovelessness: "I accept that I must pay my debts, but Scripture says I don't have to pay my love-debt." No. That's clearly not what Paul has in mind. Paul is saying that of course we must love our neighbor, as Scripture commands, even though we will always fall short of the love required of us. The perpetual debt of love will remain, as the J B Phillips translation puts it. You know when we look at our loved ones, we tend to think of love as a quid-pro-quo. I'll love you and you love me back and that way we'll both be satisfied. And there is mutual caring in healthy relationships. But in seasons where circumstances or health make it necessary that my expression of love take the lead, I need to recognize that in Christ there is no "enough," no stopping point where I have permission to say "I've loved enough." There is an ongoing obligation to love.

Yet, Paul continues: "the one who loves another has fulfilled the law." The two halves of verse 8 thus are a contrast. Stott points out that "If we love our neighbor, at least in the sense of not doing him or her any harm, we may be said to have fulfilled the law even though we have not fully paid our debt." That is just cool. The obligation to love is infinite and unachievable, but to love our neighbor with all our power and intent fulfills God's righteous requirement. We need, of course, to read Paul's statement about having fulfilled the law against the background of chapter 7, in which he argued that we are incapable of fulfilling it by ourselves, on account of our fallen, self-centered nature. He went on to say, however, that God has rescued us both from the condemnation of the law through the death of his Son, and from the bondage of the law by the power of his indwelling Spirit. What God did was "what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh,⁴ in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit." Love's fulfillment of the law is not by might, it's not by power but it's by the Spirit.

Furthermore, love is the fulfillment of the law, not its elimination. Law and love are often thought to be incompatible. There are significant differences between them, law being often negative ("you shall not") and love positive, law relating to particular sins and love being a comprehensive principle. But there is no contradiction between love and law. Every stricture, every restriction of the moral law is an expression of what is best for our relationship with God or best for our relationships with others. While we may not always see how this particular instance of obeying the command is good, we can trust that obeying it is better for us and for the life of the world than disregarding it.

But in the past decades these verses have been twisted to imply that nothing is prescribed except love, that “love is the end of law” because law is no longer needed. Advocates of this position say that love has its own built-in moral compass which discerns intuitively what a true respect for persons will demand in each situation. But this overstates the role of conscience and divorces it from cultural influence. In reality our sense of what is loving can be deeply influenced by culture, deeply flawed without an objective moral standard. Stott says “Love and law need each other. Love needs law for its direction, while law needs love for its inspiration.”

A prominent example of this in our culture is the meme or motto “Love is love.” The purpose and origin of this meme is to say that sexual expression between persons of any gender or sexual identity is as much an expression of love as the biblical model of sex within the marriage of a biological man and a biological woman. I’m tempted to hear the phrase and agree that people of any identity, gender, ethnicity or age should love each other. But that’s not what this motto is about. It’s not about love, it’s about sex, or more generously, sexual love. But Scripture is clear that some expressions of sexual love are sinful and therefore hurtful. Paul is about to say “love does no wrong to a neighbor, therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.” Thus, if the way I express love for you ultimately does you or others harm, then it is not love. And the divorce rates, mental health issues, physical trauma, and the rates of detransitioning among those who at one point identify as trans are enough to show that there is harm, quite apart from the cultural pressure to renounce and despise Christianity in the LGBTQ culture. LGBTQ is not plus, it is minus.

Love is not the elimination of the law but it’s summary and fulfillment. “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.” The ten commandments can be roughly divided between the first four, which talk about things antithetical to the love of God and the last six, which talk about things opposed to the love of neighbor. Rather than doing your neighbor good, things like murder, adultery, theft and lying do active harm to someone else. Even coveting, Stott points out “robs society of the ideals of simplicity and contentment.” And “any of the other commandments” of the moral law are intended to prevent harm to others. All these commands can be summed up in the one positive command to “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

Jesus, of course, taught this explicitly several times in his ministry. When asked what were the greatest commandments he would say “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength,” and “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

Jesus never expanded on what love your neighbor meant, because he was presenting it as a summary of everything else. But in the parable of the good Samaritan he did expand on what “your neighbor” meant. Your neighbor is anyone in need that God brings in front of you. The question is really not, “Who is my neighbor” but rather, “Who am I being a neighbor to?”

Paul summarizes in Verse 10: “Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.” We’ve already talked about the fact that in doing no wrong to a neighbor love is explicitly upholding all of the moral law. We might also add, though it seems obvious, that love for neighbor is not just refraining from harming them, but doing positive good. Paul words it the way he does here to fit with the flow of thought, but elsewhere he says it the other way. In Romans 12 which we studied a few weeks ago almost all of the ethical commands are positive: “Contribute to the needs of the saints,” “show hospitality,” “Bless those who persecute you,” “Rejoice with those who rejoice,” “live in harmony with one another,” etc. In Galatians 6:10 he says “So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.” Not just negative, but positive.

Another clarification concerns the claim that to love our neighbors as ourselves we must love ourselves first. This is clearly not what Jesus or Paul meant in prioritizing this command. The word *agape* used in all these repetitions is a selfless love that seeks the good of others, whereas self-centeredness is often identified in Scripture as a basic characteristic of all sin. “Instead,” Stott says, “we are to affirm all of ourselves which stems from the creation, while denying all of ourselves which stems from the fall.” If we love ourselves in sinful ways that do harm to ourselves, we shouldn’t love our neighbors that way. But if we love ourselves as created in the image of God and renewed in the image of Christ, we should love our neighbors that way.

So what have we seen? Love for others, done in light of the law, is the fulfillment of the law. This is a daily and hourly obligation with no sense of completion. This is extremely practical and very difficult. It means looking at every person who crosses your path and to some extent every person who appears on your screen and asking “what good can I do them?” Or even more practically “how can I help you?” This can range from clearing the table to taking up a new career that focuses care and concern on a whole category of people.

I heard this week about a woman named Becky Hymel, who worked with a Crisis Pregnancy center in North Carolina. At one point she realized that additional care was needed for families whose babies are born with fatal birth defects, about two-tenths of a percent of all babies born in the U.S. in a given year.

Her program offers palliative care for families whose babies can't survive long outside the womb. Doctors often speak about these vulnerable babies as if they are a problem and urge their parents to abort them. Hymel says "They don't get encouragement. I've had moms say "We dreaded our visits because it was just always bad news, bad news, bad news." But when they made the choice to carry and started making plans, that's when they get to laugh and smile again. Hymel often pairs a family with one who has walked a similar path before them. Because the baby is not likely to live long after birth, the families can come in often to hear their baby's heartbeat. They also receive an example birth plan that helps them arrange the moments they will spend with the baby. "Nothing can ever take the place of a baby who dies," Hymel says, but she tries to find ways to ease the pain. Sometimes loving your neighbor means devoting your life to caring in ways that haven't been done before.

And sometimes it just means encouraging the eleven year old team member who is sitting next to you on a rock deep within a flooded cave. The first notable thing about the days the team spent there in the dark is that they loved one another. The second thing that kept them from chaos was the insistence of their coach and Adun and others that help was going to come. They kept alive the anticipation of rescue, and that kept them sane. Paul's second inducement to right living is living now in the anticipation of the day to come. Romans 13:11-14 *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. ¹²The 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. ¹³Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. ¹⁴But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.*

Paul grounds right behavior in our awareness of the time we live in. He says "you know the time." He's not saying that you have a watch, but that you have an awareness of the age you live in, on the terminator between the now and the not yet, the old age and the age to come. The Greek language has a special word for this kind of time. It's the *kairos*, the season, but also the moment of opportunity. Seize the day, Paul says, using three phrases. First, "the hour has come for you to wake from sleep." Scripture frequently uses sleep as an image of a person who is spiritually dull and unresponsive. In Ephesians 5 Paul encourages us to walk as children of light, to discern what is pleasing to the lord, and to take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness. He paraphrases Isaiah saying, "awake, or sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you." Therefore, when it comes to right living, Paul says that now is the time, the hour has come, don't be a slug-a-bed with no sense of urgency.

Second “salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.” We’ve talked twice in the last few weeks about the fact that salvation is a past reality, a present reality, and a future reality. Here Paul is talking about salvation as a future reality. The culmination of Christ’s work for us, the provision of glorified bodies and complete deliverance from sin is yet to come. But it is closer than when we first believed. Even though Paul wrote these words 2000 years ago they are still true. We do not know the day or the hour of Christ’s return or of that final salvation, but we do know that it is closer now than it was yesterday.

Third, and most plainly as well as most poetically, Verse 12, “the night is far gone; the day is at hand.” My favorite time to walk is at dawn, or more accurately at first light. I love watching the color come back into the world, the transition from darkness to gray to light. Paul says we’re living in that transition. It’s the dark before the dawn, as Andrew Peterson says. Again, we should not let the passage of 2000 years bother us. Paul is not saying that the end was coming immediately. Jesus had said he did not know the time, and the apostles echoed this. Furthermore, there were things like worldwide evangelization, the restoration of Israel and the other signs of the end must all precede that final moment. But Paul and the other apostles did know that the kingdom of God came with Jesus, that the decisive salvation events, his death, resurrection, exaltation and gift of the Spirit, had already taken place, and that God had nothing on his calendar before the second coming. So they were, and we are, living in the last days. It is in this sense that Christ is coming soon.

The ‘so’ or ‘therefore’ in the middle of verse 12 marks the transition from Paul’s statements about the time to his corresponding exhortations. It is not enough to understand the time; we need to behave accordingly. Again, there are three, each of them a contrast: “don’t do this, but do do this.” The first is “So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. This continues the metaphor of night and day, darkness and light. The picture is that, because of the hour, we must not only wake up and get up, but get dressed as well. We must take off our night clothes, the deeds of darkness, and put on instead, as suitable daytime equipment for the soldiers of Christ, the armor of light. As one commentator says “the Christian life is not a sleep, but a battle.”

Second, from appropriate clothing Paul proceeds to appropriate behavior. Positively, “Let us walk properly as in the daytime,” that is, as if the day had already dawned, and turn from the things people do under cover of darkness: “not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy.” Once again, this is a contrast. Just as love for others is the positive fulfillment of the “do nots” of the ten commandments, so right behavior is in contrast to other “do nots” found in the prophets and apostles.

This list is particularly appropriate for our moment in history. Drunkenness, I guess, has always been a problem, but sexual immorality and sensuality have been amplified by the rise of technology, the rise of expressive individualism and the loss of absolutes and loss of belief in a God who cares about absolutes. And social media operates on the coinage of quarreling and jealousy. It can't succeed without division and condemnation. It also monetizes envy as we see how beautiful the influencers are and how much stuff they have and how full their lives are. All artificial and superficial of course, but it drives our culture.

Paul's third and contrast concerns our pre-occupation, what we focus on as believers. The contrast is between Jesus and our self-centred nature. Verse 14: "But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires." In Galatians Paul wrote that those who are in Christ 'have clothed' themselves with Christ. In Romans this clothing ourselves with Christ is something we have to keep doing. This takes us back to Romans 12 where we saw the characteristics of the Christian life, which are the character qualities of Jesus. But the idea here is also putting on protection from the desires of the flesh. J B Philips translates it "Let your armor be the Lord Jesus Christ." In any case, it is not just Christlikeness that we are to assume, but Christ himself, laying hold of him, and in him as Lord. In contrast to the beautiful and protective clothing which is Christ, Paul refers to our ugly, self-centred nature. It has not been eradicated; it is still there. It still has desires. Our instruction is not only not to gratify its desires, but not to think about how to do so, not to make any 'provision' for them, rather to be ruthless in repudiating them.

But don't forget that all this right living, our Christ-centered transformation, comes as we recognize the time that we are living in, the time when dawn is breaking. We have a future and a hope. We can live in anticipation of complete liberation from sin and full fellowship with Jesus that will begin one day and last forever. This anticipation sustains us in the dark. I believe it was this anticipation and hope of rescue that's sustained the Thai boys and even their coach as they waited there day after day without food and without light and without comfort. They hoped for that moment when light would rise up out of the water that trapped them and offer them hope and provision. They still had a long way to go. They had to trust these divers to find them a way out. The full light of day was still days off. But eventually they were drawn out by the skill of others into that light. In the same way you and I will be drawn out of this darkness into the full light of Christ's presence. In the meantime we are called to right living by positively loving other and by hanging on to the hope.