

The Primacy of Love Romans 13:8-10

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The first seven verses of Romans 13 deals with the Christian's obligation to the state.

God's invested authority to government, the submission to rulers, the payment of taxes, and respect for those in public office.

After explaining this, Paul turns his attention to the Christian's responsibility toward all men in Romans 13:8-10; the obligation to love.

In fact, our relationship to others is summarized in this one word... Love. That's why love is a theme found throughout Scripture.

It's the theme of countless hymns and secular poetry. Literature and music are permeated with its message.

We're told that "*Love makes the world go round,*" and there's little doubt that people generally hold that idea in high regard.

But the love that reside in peoples' minds is something between a noble ideal and an optional extra. This is why Paul explains that love is an obligation as real as taxation and repaying personal debt.

Three times in these verses Paul writes of the need to love our neighbor. He points out that love is the key to all godly obedience because love fulfills God's law.

In these verses, Paul explains the Debt of Love, the Discharge of Love, and the Design of Love.

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So, if we have a debt which must be paid in love, what should the attitude of the justified believer be toward others?

Verse 8 answers that question, *"Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law."*

This statement is a continuation of verse 7 which explains the Christians' responsibility to discharge or pay their debts. We're to be on time in paying our bills and meeting our tax demands.

Before entering into a mortgage or hiring someone or purchasing anything, we want to be assured that we can manage the agreed upon repayments punctually.

Even though we should try to stay out of debt, there's one debt which will always remain due, because we can never pay it off; that's our obligation to love.

We can never stop loving and say, *"I've loved enough."* The basic principle of the Christian life is to love one another.

Jesus even commanded His followers to love. John 13:34-35, *"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."*

In fact, love is the theme of John's first letter. 1 John 4:7-8, *"Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love."*

To love one another applies to our neighbors, too, even if they're unbelievers; not just those who are likeable and friendly.

In Luke 10:25-37, Jesus taught that our neighbor includes any person that God places in our path that has a need that they're not capable of handling.

We must love our neighbor as Scripture commands, even though we'll always fall short of the love required, because we can never repay the love Christ showed us on the cross.

It's a Christian's obligation to express divine love in all inter-personal relationships. Since love is the fulfillment of the law, *"For he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law."*

If we love our neighbor, at least in the sense of wanting God's good for him or her and not doing them harm, we've fulfilled the law but we still haven't paid our love obligation.

This kind of love doesn't put an end to the law, it's just the only way you can fulfill it. Love is the essence and expression of the Law.

Godly love is a matter of choice, and nothing less than a willing, voluntary love is pleasing to God. Only Godly love can energize and unify His people.

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Not only must we grasp the reality that love is an obligation, and that love fulfills the law, but we must awake to the reality of the nature of that love.

Though love has its romantic and its sentimental aspects, and certainly today love has sexual connotations, but the agape love spoken of here is a choice to behave in a certain way, simply because it's right.

In fact, various commands from the Ten Commandments are quoted in verse 9 to substantiate that loves fulfills the Law.

“You shall not commit adultery,” “You shall not murder,” “You shall not steal,” “You shall not covet” are summed up in this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

Paul declares that love fulfills the law by quoting five specific laws, the first four are from the 7th, 6th, 8th, and 10th commandments. The fifth is from the sacrificial law found in Leviticus 19:18.

You shall love and therefore *“not commit adultery,”* because such sinful defilement of a person shows disregard for another's purity.

Love values the virtue of others and will do nothing that's morally defiling. Like every other form of sexual immorality, adultery comes from impure, sinful lust, never from pure love.

The same principle applies to the person who would commit murder or who would steal. Love doesn't rob others of their life, their reputation, or their property.

Coveting is an envious desire to possess what belongs to another. Because it doesn't always have an outward manifestation, when we covet, the Lord may be the only one who's aware of that sin.

But again, if we're loving, we'll not covet. Instead, we'll be grateful for the gifts, abilities, talents, and blessings another possesses. Love has no part in any unrighteousness.

Jesus made it clear that all sin originates in the heart and in the will, whether or not it's expressed outwardly.

Matthew 15:19, *“For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.”*

Thus, it must be dealt with in the heart through learning to love. Love overcomes sin's place of origin.

The believer who does the positive and loves with God's love doesn't need to concentrate on the negative or worry about breaking those or any other commandment.

There's something about doing the law of love that empowers one to live a holy life that automatically keeps him or her from the negative.

This is why God asks us to concentrate on the positive aspects of love rather than on the prohibitions or the negative events which break the law.

So, is it the "*do not's*" that break your focus of attention or is it on fulfilling the obligations of love? Godly love can control your life and, in return, it will automatically keep you from breaking God's law.

The entire section of the Law is summed up by quoting Leviticus 19:18, "*Love your neighbor as yourself.*" The Jewish Rabbis and Jesus summarized the social section of the Law in the same words.

Of all the laws God has given—six hundred thirteen according to the Rabbis—they're summed up in that singular word: love.

But this expression, "*you shall love your neighbor as yourself,*" merits a word of explanation.

Somehow many of us have gotten the idea that self-love is wrong. Since, if this were the case, it would be pointless to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Even if you have low self-esteem, you probably don't willingly let yourself go hungry. You clothe yourself. You make sure there's a roof over your head.

You try not to let yourself be cheated or injured. You get angry if someone tries to ruin your marriage. This is the kind of love we need to have for our neighbors, too.

Do we see that our neighbors are adequately fed, clothed, and housed? Are we concerned about issues of social justice?

Loving others as ourselves means to be actively working to see that other people's needs are met and not just our own.

Interestingly, people who focus on others rather than on themselves rarely suffer from low self-esteem.

The first part of verse 10 expresses this same principle: "*Love does no wrong to a neighbor.*"

Agape love is selfless love which can't be turned inward. According to Scripture, selfish love is the essence of sin.

If we love with a godly love, we'll seek our neighbors' good, not their harm.

The point is, if our love is godly, concerned for the welfare of others, then we'll do them no wrong. A Christian who allows God's love to rule his life is divinely protected from doing harm to anyone.

Someone once said that if we love God with all our heart and other people with all our heart, we can do as we please, because we'll only do that which pleases God and benefits others.

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The major point of Romans 13:8-10 is repeated in the last part of verse 10, "*Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.*"

Contrary to what many people think, living by love and living by the law are not mutually exclusive. They are, in fact, inseparably related.

God's law cannot be obeyed apart from love, because love, and only love *"is the fulfillment of the law."*

Early in His ministry, Jesus declared in Matthew 5:17, *"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them."*

Later, in the Sermon of the Mount, in what's commonly called the golden rule, Jesus said, *"So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets."*

Even James refers to loving our neighbors as ourselves as *"fulfilling the royal law, according to the Scripture."* Love fulfills the Lord's golden rule and His royal law.

Christians must obey the law of love since it supersedes both civil and moral law. Love fulfills what God desires of us.

I heard an analogy from the field of music that may help you understand the greatness and completeness of love.

The musical scale has only seven basic notes, which many children can learn in an hour or less.

Yet great composers, such as Handel and Beethoven couldn't exhaust those notes and their variations in an entire lifetime.

Godly love is like that. It uses the basic, and sometimes seemingly insignificant things of daily life, to produce the greatest results.

Love controls temper and guides reason. It seeks to overcome the worst qualities and develop the best.

Under the guidance and in the power of the Holy Spirit, it transforms redeemed men and women more and more into the likeness of Jesus Christ.

There's no greatness of character to which love cannot elevate a person. In fact, no greatness of character is possible without it, because love produces godly character.

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Conclusion

Only Spirit-wrought-love in the human heart is sufficiently powerful to cause a person to remove all obstacles and love his neighbor even if his neighbors aren't pleasant.

It's love that *"is not easily angered, keeps no record of wrongs, always protects and always hopes."* Does this describe your love? It can and should.

Such human love has its origins in God, for God is love. Love taps into the transforming power of the cross and finds God's empowering to fulfill the words of Jesus spoken just a few hours before His crucifixion.

"A new commandment I give you, that you keep on loving one another, just as I have loved you, that you keep on loving one another."

Only in Christ can a person meet this or any of the other demand of the Law. Will you receive this supernatural capacity to love?