

Romans 13:8-14

Love Thy Neighbor

In the gospels, Jesus is approached and asked what is the greatest commandment. His answer, of course, is to quote from Deuteronomy, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and strength and mind.” And then he added a second commandment that he said was like the first, quoting from Leviticus this time, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” He said that all the law was summed up in these two commandments.

According to our understanding of the life of the Apostle Paul, he was never around when Jesus was preaching and teaching, but became a follower of Christ sometime after the cross and resurrection of Jesus.

This tradition about the greatest commandments, however, was powerful enough that Paul heard about it and here in his own words he repeats it, “love is the fulfillment of Torah.”

It is an astonishing idea, actually, because we ordinary associate “law” with “civil law.” It is hard to imagine a society that makes a law that starts out, “you shall love . . .” Perhaps it is good to remember that “Torah,” the Hebrew word often translated, “law,” may also be translated, “instruction,” or, “teaching.” Whatever the case, this great religious tradition has confronted us with a positive command, “you shall love . . .” It is challenging to us, it goes against our instincts.

Eteros

I should clarify that there is a very strong human instinct to love our families and friends, very often the people related to us biologically or through a strong sense of community, often based on economics or ethnicity or religion. What goes against our instincts is to love those who are strange to us, those not a part of our family, or religious or ethnic group, those not like us.

In the NIV, the text says that whoever loves his fellow-man has fulfilled the law. I checked several translations and found it rendered, “another, one another, neighbor. I was a little surprised to read in the original language that this word simply means, “other, different, or even strange.” It was only in the Berea Literal Bible did I find, “the other.” The love for the other is what challenges our instincts and makes the commandment difficult. The one who loves, “the other,” has fulfilled the law.

Whichever translation one accepts, the idea is pervasive through scripture and can’t be escaped. Jesus even puts it this way, “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” He says that if we fail to love our enemies we are no better than anyone else.

The text, therefore, presents us with a simple but difficult challenge, “love the other.”

The Present Situation

And Paul doesn't just leave it there. He urges his readers to consider the present time. He tells them that our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. "The night is nearly over, the day is almost here." Wake up! Rise and shine! "Set aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light."

The "present situation" refers to the return of Christ, which it is clear that Paul thought was immanent, not meaning that it could happen at any time, but that it was about to happen. I am reminded of my niece, who is 37 now but was about 4 when she used to say, "not now, in a minute." To her, you see, "not now," meant maybe never. "In a minute," meant soon.

About this immanence, Paul was clearly wrong. It has been almost 2,000 years. If our only motivation for decency and love is that we believe there are only a few days left, then we are going to need to find another incentive.

The Daytime Deeds

He calls for decency. This means modesty and respectability. He gives examples though this is surely not an exhaustive list. ". . . not in orgies or drunkenness or sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension or jealousy." Though drunkenness and sexual immorality are prevalent in our culture they are

not so prevalent among us. There is, however, plenty of dissension to go around, even among Christians.

Setting aside these things and much more like them, we are told to clothe ourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ and not to think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh.

Society

It is hard to have a conversation these days without putting people into the categories that mark our divisions. We are divided by the categories of wealth, race, political party, religion, ethnicity, geography, education, and all other kinds of things.

I am increasingly distressed by these divisions and especially by the way they divide Christians from one another. Our language can be quite severe towards those with whom we differ. Our text confronts us with a question that will have to be put several different ways:

Who is it okay to disregard, to discriminate against, to leave out? By what justification may we think less of someone? In New Testament times there were Gentiles and tax collectors and pharisees. And there are sinners, people who are judged worse than others. Who is it okay to judge?

The gospel answer is, of course, "no one."

Boyce and Toy

There is a legend at Southern Seminary where I attended for eight years. The first president, James Boyce, who was also one of the founders of the school, was a high calvinist and believed in a strict adherence to the school's confession of faith. A Hebrew and Old Testament professor named Crawford Howell Toy was one of the early scholars to use historical criticism which set him at odds with the Southern Baptists and the seminary's theological heritage. Boyce fired Toy over these differences.

The legend is that Boyce was deeply saddened by the termination, and even though he thought it was necessary, when he escorted Toy to the train depot, embraced him as he departed, and wept like a baby.

We don't seem to weep at the tragedy, or else just feel relieved. Too often we disregard one another's pain.

Sometimes I think we need to have a good cry like that. No matter what you think is the answer to any of our problems, the reality is that people are hurt, and will be hurt. Just that, even if we think that they deserve it, should drive us to wherever we go to be alone a get away from things and break down and weep until our shoulders shake at the tragedy of people rejecting each other, playing out before us. Weep because these divisions seem to have gotten

the best of us, because when we read a scripture like this one which puts things so clearly, we are not saddened enough by the failure to fulfill the law, by the reality of other people's pain.

Hope

The definition of a "psychopath" is simply this, "a mental health disorder characterized by disregard for other people." A sociopath is the same only less. Forgive me if I seem out of line for saying it, but we suffer a cultural socio-pathology and it is tragic, worthy of our tears, contrary to the fulfillment of biblical teaching.

I speak to you as one who is guilty, on many counts. But also as one who has great hope, hope that one day we will get better than we are at loving our neighbors, *all* our neighbors, especially the other ones, the ones who are different, strange.

My hope is strengthened in times like the present with the hurricanes in which people are seem disregarding all our differences and helping one another out. My hope is founded, however, upon the grace of God, revealed to us in Jesus Christ.

Remember his cross, upon which our salvation came, and clothe ourselves with the love that drove him there, as our salvation draws near.

[Back](#)

[Home](#)