

We Are For.5.Love
Romans 13:8-10
November 13, 2022 – 6:00 p.m.

This Sunday morning series we're doing...what Christ followers are for...I discovered while planning that out that Christians are **for** way more things than I could cover with the Sunday mornings that were available. So we're pushing that theme into a couple Sunday nights here...I hope that's OK.

Again as a reminder, we've said, so far, that followers of Jesus are **for**:

First, **absolute truth** – based on God's revelation of Himself as we find in His written and living Word.

Second, we are for **new beginnings**...people can be, in every important way, born again.

Third, Christians are for **valuing the past**...we fix our eyes on what God's done yesterday for faith for tomorrow.

Fourth, Christ followers are **for**, we said this morning, **not** the **world's** sort, but **God's** sort of **justice**.

Tonight, Christ followers are for...love.

Of course, you had to know that one was coming sooner or later. I mean, "love" **must** appear in every list of Christian values. Depending on the translation, it's spoken of between 350 and 550 times in the Bible. But you know, even if it wasn't...even if it just appeared in one single verse, if that verse happened to be 1 John 4:8, which states that "God is love," then that would be enough, right? To put love on our list.

The logic is simple enough: if Christ-followers are for God, and God is love, then Christ-followers are for love.

But what does that mean, really, that we are for love?

What is love, anyway?

It's a good question, particularly in light of the culture in which we live. And it's a question we need to answer, because if we're for love, we'd better know what love is, since if we define it incorrectly, not only are we acting in wrong ways, we're misrepresenting God before our world.

If the Bible says, "God is love," and we say we're **for** love, then...just like God's kind of truth and God's kind of justice, we want to make sure that we're for God's kind of love.

And I think Romans 13 can help us get something of a handle on that, so I'd invite you to take a Bible and turn there with me...Romans chapter 13, verses 8 through 14 is where we'll land for just a bit tonight.

My version here translates Paul's words this way: **"Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law. 9 The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery," "You shall not murder," "You shall not steal," "You shall not covet," and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." 10 Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.**

In the verses right before this, Paul outlines how the follower of Christ is to relate with others in **large** form – the state...which, let me just say, really deserves it's own, probably message **series**.

Writing this, Paul, of course, could never have imagined a government like ours here in the United States, where the people actually have a say in how government operates. So the whole notion of any Biblical concept of the Christian's obedience to, and engagement with, government...in our American setting, is a fascinating and at times controversial thing to study.

Still, once all the engagement is said and done and decisions are made, Paul would say our role, then, is to submit ourselves to those governmental authorities...as far, of course, as God's moral laws will allow.

While it's true that "**we,**" as Peter said, "**must obey God rather than men,**" we should remember that that declaration Peter made was about evangelism and not about paying, what we might think is a bit too much in taxes.¹

It seems to me that the end of it is...we are to seek to live, **not** rebelliously, but **submissively** to the state, however we may morally do so before God.

But then Paul changes gears a bit and moves, in our text here, to how we are to get along with others in **small** form...our neighbors, or literally, "the other one," and unlike with the state, this involves far more than just going along with the legal requirements.

This is where love comes in.

Paul has introduced the centrality of love already back in chapter 12, but here he takes it a step further. As Paul Achtemeier puts it, "To understand love as the basic requirement for the Christian who lives under the grace of Christ is to understand the Christian life as the fulfillment of the law God gave to Israel."

As Jesus is the one to whom the Law of Israel pointed and in whom it found it's culmination...it's in the love that Jesus commanded that we find the primary obligation of one person to another.

Paul says it plainly there, where he says in verse 10, "**Love is the fulfillment of the law.**"

That's why we are to love.

But some would say, "I can't just love someone I don't truly love...I can't turn emotion on and off like that."

True enough, but the problem there, though, is that that definition of love is not Paul's definition.

Our culture has so perverted love that it's no wonder we read about it here and want to give up in frustration. To our society, love has come to mean either mere sentimentality or else that feeling that comes over a person when an attractive person comes into view.

In our culture, love has become identified with an emotional state, but that's not at all what the New Testament, or Paul here, means by love.

To say that God loves us does not mean that He gets a warm feeling inside when He thinks of us.

The fact is, we know God loves us, not because of the way He **feels about** us, but because of what He's **done for** us in Jesus.

In a similar way, the New Testament's idea of love centers on **actions...not emotions**.

In brief, to love someone, Scripturally, is to actively work toward that person's good.

That means that, in Matthew 5, when Jesus calls us to love our enemy, he's calling us, not so much to change our emotional state toward that person but rather to do good for that person...work toward that person's good.²

Love acts for the good of another.

That is the love that Paul talks about here...and that is the love that fulfills the Law.

And Paul gives specific examples, not of changed emotions toward persons, but of changed **behavior**.

First, Paul says, love moves us to recognize and discharge our obligations to others promptly.

¹ Acts 5:29

² Matthew 5:44

Verse 8: ***“Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another...”***

You see...respect, honor, cooperation and fairness are not just owed to the state. Every human person is sacred...each one bears God’s image, and should be treated justly. That means financially, of course, but also with regard to opinions, respect, patience, benefit of doubt, our thoughts, words, and a hundred other things, Christians love by keeping those sorts of debts to others paid up...with the one exception, Paul says, of the debt that we can never pay up...that ongoing debt to love the other.

That we never pay off, you see.

Where others are concerned, we should perform urgently, quickly and completely every possible constructive act of good will. That is one way Christians love...and we are for that kind of love in relationship, since that is what, Paul says there at the end of the verse 8, ***“fulfills the Law.”***

Paul ***then***, in verse nine there, gets more specific by taking a few of the prohibitions from the Ten Commandments to show us ways to act in love toward others.

First, he says, love means keeping promises, and especially within marriage. The 7th commandment. Someone who loves will not commit adultery.

As Barclay says, “When two people allow their passions to sweep them away, the reason is not because they love each other too much. The reason is that they love each other too little.”

Paul then moves to the 6th commandment – thou shall not murder, saying, in effect, love is honoring and preserving another’s life and welfare. Love builds up, not tears down, another person.

Love is also honoring and preserving another’s property...always more concerned with giving than with getting. That’s commandment number eight.

Finally, Paul notes the 10th commandment, which means love is accepting and even celebrating, instead of resenting, that which others have. When we move toward resentment...that’s when we start to want it for ourselves, which leads away from love and to violation. That’s when ***our own*** good begins to overtake the good of others in our vision.

You see, just as we would not want these things done to us...adultery, murder, theft, coveting...and anything else like them...just as we would not want them done to us, we cannot commit them against someone else without placing a vastly lower valuation on that person’s good.

That’s why...if we truly love our neighbor, we simply will not commit these injustices, or any like them, against them.

Paul sums it up there in verse 10, ***“Love does no harm to a neighbor...therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.”***

There is a famous saying, “Love God...and then do what you like,” and what it means is...if love is the centerpiece of a person’s heart...if love for God and for others so dominates a person’s life, then there is no need for any other law, because the law of love makes all other law unnecessary.

So, again, love is not so much ***what we feel for*** as it is ***what we do for*** our neighbor.

Loving our neighbor is doing our neighbor no harm.

But...you notice here, too, that in order to love as God loves, we must have in mind God’s ideas of “harm.”

Our society would suggest that making people feel uncomfortable is harm...

or that disagreeing with someone is harm...

or that telling someone they are mistaken is harm...

or that making children eat vegetables or drink milk or do something else they may not like to do is harm.

That's why society's definition of love has been reduced to "niceness."

Yet God's ideas of harm are much more substantial and sometimes, much more serious.

Our society says, "If you love me, you'll let me do as I wish."

God says, "When doing as you wish will lead to hurt or death, then I will love you by doing all I can to stop you...for your good."

American culture says, "If you love me, you'll agree with me."

God says, "Because I love you, I will disagree with you since I know that allowing you to continue to believe what you do will lead to your harm...and I am for your good."

We do not love our children by letting them do what they wish.

If we do that, we actually contribute to their destruction.

God does the same with us...and He calls us to do the same for those around us.

As patiently and kindly and graciously as possible...and according to the leading and timing of the Spirit, certainly...we love our neighbors by working for good...as God defines it...in their lives.

According to Scripture, that is love.

That is the love that does no harm to our neighbors.

That's the love that fulfills the Law.

That's the kind of love that's real...that upholds and respects and dignifies life here...and that leads to life eternal.

That is the love Christ-followers are *for*.

I don't have to tell you, though, that to love like that in a broken world takes work, it takes commitment, it takes faith, it takes tenacity, and it takes patience. I know that. There's no question about it.

But we must keep at it, painful as it can be sometimes.

Please...keep at it.

In the end, sooner or later...one way or another...the truth of what love really is will make itself known.

Sooner or later, those we've loved with God's sort of love will realize it and they will either thank us...or they will wish they had.

Which will be far better than hearing from those who, as they sit in their misery that we helped create because we didn't love them enough to tell them the truth, would say to us, "You knew the truth...why didn't you tell me? Why didn't you love me enough to tell me?"

Loving as God loves can make for some hard life moments. I mean, consider Jesus...the incarnation of God's love.

Jesus acts out that love in all He says and does.

He is a love that warns as well as comforts.

He both promises and fulfills.

Jesus' is a love that gives itself freely for the good of others, even if that means death on a cross.

But...He is also God's redemptive love that rises in victory over death, which assures us that love will prevail.

In Jesus, we see just what Paul is saying here: love is not mere sentiment. Love is act – done for the sake of another's good.

And in the end, love will prevail.

That is why Christ followers are for love.

Some in our world do not believe that yet, but one day they will. And in that day, we will want to have been faithful to have truly loved them.

That's why we choose to love.

That's why we're for love.

Who is it that God's Spirit is asking you to truly love...to make the decision, right here and now, that from now on, you are going to love them. You are going to work and work and work...never for their harm...always for their good?

If a face or name is coming to mind, make that agreement here with the Lord tonight, that, no matter how you might *feel* about them...you are going to choose to love them.