

**Sermon for Sunday, December 5, 2010**  
**Dr. Dan Doriani**  
**Love in the Ruins**  
**Romans 13:8-10 and John 13:34, Luke 10:29-37**

## 1. God's incarnated love restores a ruined world

I read a serious advice column on life's social riddles. This week half the questions concerned Christmas gifts. First, how should I handle an extended family that requests gifts cards, in prescribed amounts, from prescribed stores? It seems a bit selfish, the writer says, almost like taking money from each other's wallets.

Second, what shall I do about a boy friend who buys expensive but inappropriate gifts? What's his problem, we wonder. Is he buying her chain saws rather than earrings? Third, should I still send gifts to nephews and nieces who never acknowledge even the best gifts? Gifts are a major element of Christmas for many of us. We think hard about the ideal gift. Some of us dread the shopping and some of us dread the need to propose a gift. Our faith and Paul's teaching on love can restore gospel-led sanity.

Paul's teaching on love, in Romans 13, shows the way. This part of Romans is full of commands, which we need to place in gospel context. Indeed, the life of Christ, including his birth, offers context for the life of love.

First, God's actions *for us* are the basis of his commands *to us*. His saving work leads to his commands. The indicative drives the imperative. When Paul says, "love your neighbor as yourself" it rests on his description of God's love:

Romans 8:35, 39: "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ.... Neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." The love of Jesus impels us to love one another and so fulfill the law (13:10).

Consider the way Jesus' life leads to the love commands. First, Paul is quoting Jesus. Paul said, "Love your neighbor as yourself," but Jesus said it first: love of God and neighbor are the two great commandments. They fulfill "all the law and the Prophets" (Matt. 22:34-40).

Second, Jesus described that love in the parable of the Good Samaritan. You know the story: A teacher of law tests Jesus with a question: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" It was a test because the teacher wanted to test Jesus, not *learn* from him. He wanted to see if Jesus could give the right answer. In fact, Jesus enticed the man to answer his own question, correctly, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and strength and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

Love God and neighbor is the "correct answer," but the teacher already knew that. So he asked a follow-up question: "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied:

"A man was going from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead." A priest, from whom we expect mercy, was going down that road, but when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, from whom we also expect mercy, also came, saw him, and passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, from whom we least expect mercy, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took

pity on him. "He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him" (Luke 10:30-34).

This parable first shows what it means to love a neighbor. It says, "Your neighbor may not live next door. She may not work with you. You may not know him, but if your lives intersect, you are neighbors. If she has a need, help, because she is your neighbor and we should love our neighbors."

When we studied Jesus' parables we noticed that Jesus often puts himself in his stories. For example, in the story of the prodigal son, the father welcomes sinners who come home. In real life Jesus welcomes sinners who come home. So Jesus often puts himself in his parables.

It's easy to see Jesus in this story. He loves us, his neighbors, just as the Samaritan loved the man who was half-dead. Jesus is our Good Samaritan. Spiritually, we are half dead, headed toward complete death. We had no reason to expect a rescue, but Jesus came unexpectedly, saw us, took pity on us and rescued us. Jesus began to do this that first Christmas. When he took flesh, he became our neighbor and started down the road toward us. First, Jesus' love restores.

## **2. God's love motivates love in this world**

When Paul says, "Love one another" he tells us to love others as he loved us. Rom 5:5, 8 says, "God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us. God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Therefore we love one another (13:8).

There are dozens of commandments in Romans 12-13, eight in our short passage. All of them teach us to respond to the gospel, from Romans 3-11: God declared us righteous when we were sinners, befriended us when we were enemies, covered our sins when guilty, and renewed us so we could break with sin. Even if we fall far short of his standards, even though we falter in many ways, nothing can separate us from his love. Therefore we should offer ourselves wholly to God. Jesus says that we love with heart, soul, mind, and strength. Paul, saying the same thing from another perspective, stressing body, mind, and will:

Therefore, I urge you... to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God — this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is, his good, pleasing and perfect will (Rom. 12:1-2).

Paul then gives us commands - his commands *are* gifts, when received not as a way to gain God's love, but a way to show God's love. That is essential, since (13:10), "love is the fulfillment of the law." Paul said love must be sincere, devoted, affectionate, patient (12:9-16). It goes to family first, but also to strangers. It goes to fellow Christians, yet even to enemies. Paul said, "Bless those who persecute you" (12:14).

That led to a digression: What should disciples do when persecuted? "Do not repay anyone evil for evil.... As far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge" for God said, 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay....' On the contrary, 'If your enemy is hungry, feed him.'" In this way, we "overcome evil with good" (12:17-21).

Someone will ask: Can't we resist evil? What if someone comes after me with a knife? Can't we defend ourselves? Yes, you can hit them with a stick (or whatever will stop them). But resistance, defense and punishment of evil is normally the duty of the state or other corporate entities. Individuals do not punish, the state does. The magistrate bears the sword. He threatens to punish evil and does so if necessary. As individuals we show love and respect to everyone (13:1-7).

These commands also prevent a possible misunderstanding. When Paul described the freedom of the Christian, he said, "You are not under law, but under grace" (6:14). It's possible to hear that as an invitation to lawlessness. We're free to sin because the more we sin, the more grace. "No," says Paul, "if we follow Jesus, we love their neighbors." The law teaches us how to do that – and some of it even applies to Christmas celebrations.

God's love restores this ruined world and motivates love in this world.

### 3. The law teaches us *how to love in this world*

Paul begins, "Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another" (13:8). "No debt" is both elegant and practical. It's elegant because it links the section on the state to the section on love. Romans 13:7-8 can be translated like this:

13:7: "Pay what you owe to everyone" – whether taxes, respect, or honor.

13:8: "Owe nothing to anyone, except to love one another." The concept of paying debts is repeated in 13:7-8. "Pay your debts, what you owe," he says first. Next, "Don't be indebted to anyone, beyond the ongoing debt of love."

When Paul talks about debts or obligations, he primarily means the debt of love, but it applies to financial debt too, because debts make it hard to love others. Our debts press us; we're out of sorts. And it's hard to be generous, to give, when debts are crushing us.

The Bible *regulates* but never prohibits lending, borrowing, or incurring debt. God gave Israel laws to govern the way they borrowed and repaid. Jesus said, "Don't turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you" (Matt. 5:42). We are free to borrow and lend in case of need (Exod. 22:25). The righteous man lends generously (Psa. 37:26). The Bible does say we should promptly repay debts we do incur (and in the terms of contract). Since the verb is a present imperative, the message is ongoing.

So then, "Don't continue owing. Pay your debts."<sup>1</sup> By contrast, David says, "The wicked borrows but does not pay back" (Psa. 37:21, English Standard Version (ESV)). Thus the Bible condemns heedless borrowing and careless repayment.<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, if we use a mortgage to buy a house, we are not in debt if we pay the agreed amount on time every month. Essentially, we're paying a fee to rent someone's money. It's like renting a house. In each case we pay for the right to use someone's capital.

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<sup>1</sup> Morris, 467.

<sup>2</sup> Murray, 2:158-9

We are in debt when we do not or cannot repay what we owe. We're in debt when we put ourselves in a position where it's impossible to pay what we owe.

If you're in debt, you *may* have a spiritual problem, not just a financial one. You may be in debt "honestly," because of unforeseeable economic disruptions. Or you may be in debt because you adopted a consumer lifestyle. Maybe you define yourself by your ability to purchase homes, food, clothes, and vacations according to the standards of a certain class. But we should find our identity in status as creatures made in the image of God and adopted into the family of God.

You may try to fill the empty places in your soul by purchasing things that make you feel happy, important or successful. Even if you aren't in debt, you can make that mistake. Still, if you are in debt, consider: Is the problem is spiritual?

We know the way out of debt: stop buying on credit, cut your expenses so they are lower than your income. Consider selling assets. Start paying off your debt each month. It's straightforward – unless you love money and possessions.

This is relevant at Christmas because we can be tempted to buy gifts we can't quite afford for people we love. A thoughtful gift *can be* a token of love like toast tongs. But if you love your family, gifts are a small part of our relationship. To restate: Don't confuse a loving gift, once a year, with the gifts of love you offer every day. Gifts, however thoughtful, cannot fulfill the debt of loving one another (13:8). It's just as good to wash the dishes by hand as it is to buy a dishwasher – maybe better.

## Love

Owe no one anything, have no ongoing debt, except to love one another. Origen: "Let your only debt that is unpaid be that of love, a debt which you should always be attempting to discharge in full, but will never succeed in discharging." Love is always an obligation and we can never perfectly fulfill it.<sup>3</sup>

We should confess that to God. We never love perfectly, not for long anyway. It's humbling to admit it, but it leads us to worship Jesus and seek his forgiveness.

We worship: "Lord Jesus, you are the only one who always loves, always fulfill the debt of love. The incarnation is the magnificent overture to your life of love." Because we love this life, we hardly realize how much Jesus sacrificed to take human flesh. We see poorly and move slowly. Our bodies ache and suffer hunger, thirst, and irrational desires.

Think what Jesus sacrificed just in laying aside his omniscience: Jesus saw past, present and future perfectly. He saw all beauty and virtue, every triumph, at all times. When he became a man, he gave that up. Yet he took our flesh, so he could love us.

Like the Good Samaritan, he plucked us from the road when we were beaten up, strangers, left for dead. But even more, he gave not his wealth, but his life, ultimately, on the cross.

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<sup>3</sup> Sanday, Rom, 375.

Then he said, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another" (John 13:34). It's right for us to confess that we do not love as he loved. We should ask forgiveness and grace to love more.

Romans 13:9 has a short summary of the laws for our relations to our neighbors. He does not name all of them; he even lists them out of order (as in the Godfather: Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, Wednesday) – 7, 6, 8, 10, adding, "If there is any other..." He's not aiming for precision. He means: all commands point to and explain, "Love neighbor as self." Let's consider two of these.

## Coveting

It is very easy to covet. I once visited the famed "Church of the Holy Sepulcher" in Israel. As you know, Christians try to identify where great events in Jesus' ministry took place, then put a church on top of it, so no one can actually see it. The place of Jesus' burial and resurrection is supreme. Most evidence points to a site on which a dark building sprawls. One author describes it this way:<sup>4</sup>

One expects the central shrine of Christendom to stand out in majestic isolation, but anonymous buildings cling to it like barnacles. One looks for numinous light, but it is dark and cramped. One hopes for peace, but the ear is assailed by a cacophony of warring chants. One desires holiness, only to encounter a jealous possessiveness: the six groups of occupants – Latin Catholics, Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, Syrians, Copts, Ethiopians – watch one another suspiciously for any infringement of rights. The frailty of humanity is nowhere more apparent than here... The empty who come to be filled will leave desolate."

Christians are coveting, perhaps attempting to steal control of this sacred space from each other. That sad account is all the sadder because these covetous Christians focus on superficial things. Does it matter which *tomb* held Jesus? No tomb holds him now! We all have the ability to lose perspective. We can look to laws that promote our rights, see things selfishly. (Yet God's love can overcome our nonsense. People have still found the Lord in chaos, tension of that church.)

Romans 13:9 still: Clearly, we do not love our neighbor if rob them or murder them. But many people call adultery a victimless crime. What is the harm between consenting adults? Let me answer this way: Recall the thirty-three Chilean miners who were rescued this fall after months underground. Here's a little-reported fact: more than thirty-three women held vigil for the men. Some men had wives *and* girlfriends on the site. When wives stumbled across other women praying over photos of their husbands, it didn't seem victimless.

So the command to love one another remains. Love is the fulfillment of the law. Again, earlier Paul said we do not obey the law and cannot do the good we intend. What then? In ourselves, we do fail, but Jesus gives us his Spirit and Paul says that makes a difference:

"The Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son... in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit" (Rom. 8:2-4).

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<sup>4</sup> Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, *The Holy Land: An Oxford Arch. Guide*, 2008.

How shall we love our neighbors? First, "love does no harm to its neighbor," (13:10a). From the rest of the Scripture, we know we should also do active good. To fail to feed a starving man is as good as killing him.

"Love is the fulfillment of the law." This means that the law shows us how to love. We love our neighbors by obeying the laws that govern our actions toward them. Once Christ has come, forgiven our sins, and sent his Spirit, law and love are friends, partners.

"Love cannot manage on its own without an objective moral standard."<sup>5</sup> If we try to love, simply drawing on our feelings and guesses, we will go astray. "Particular commandments, into which the law breaks down the general obligation of love... *save us from resting content with vague, often hypocritical sentiments.*"<sup>6</sup> To love well, we have to tell the truth, honor property, keep promises, control our anger, and obey the rest of the law. So love needs the law.

Love also needs meditation, empathy, even willingness to plan out our love. Consider love for our friends. We know we can take them for granted, like the clothes we wear or the heat that flows through our house on a winter morning. Sometimes we want friendship to be a mutual admiration society rather than a mutual edification society. True friends have fun; we also groan together and grow in grace together. We have so many sore spots in life; we want to keep our friendships cheerful and fun, so we can avoid life issues. Instead we should offer a word of instruction, even rebuke, and we should be willing to hear them too.

We want to love our co-workers. It's far too easy to see them as a skill-set, a function, a source of help or direction, not as people. They *are* people.

We want to love irritating people, the people we try to avoid, the people that make us think, "Please don't call." We need the Lord to show us how to love foolish people, needy people, self-destructive people, oblivious people, the people who are sad or depressed whether they have good reason for it or not. May God give us grace to love the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the lost. If they cannot return our love, let us remember that when we love them, we love you.

We want to love our family: parent, child, husband, wife, brother, sister.

- We love them the best and we love them the worst.
- In the same day, they drive us crazy and shower us with bliss.
- We do things *for them* that we would never do for anyone else and we do things *to them* that we would never do to anyone else.

So Lord, we want to love because you first loved us. We need to see the Incarnation as the first act in God's great and loving drama of redemption. Now we want to love one another in word and deed. We want to show others the steadfast love, the patience, kindness, compassion, tenderness, and perseverance you show us, in this season and every season. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> Stott, Romans 349

<sup>6</sup> Murray