

“Freedom to Love”

Devotional Reading: Matthew 22:34-40

Background Scripture: Romans 13:8-10; 1 Corinthians 13:8-13

Romans 13:8–10 (NIV)

⁸ 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.

1 Corinthians 13:8–13 (NIV)

⁸ Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. ⁹ For we know in part and we prophesy in part, ¹⁰ but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. ¹¹ When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. ¹² For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

¹³ And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

LESSON AIMS

- **Learning Fact:** To identify the greatest of Christian virtues that remain or abide.
- **Biblical Principle:** To understand that ministering to others in love is in fact serving God.
- **Daily Application:** To show love for God by loving others.

INTRODUCTION

Life Under Law and Love

A woman married a man who eventually was almost impossible to live with. He became very demanding, insisting that his meals be served at exactly the same time every day and prepared according to his specifications. He wanted every piece of his clothing to be ironed, every room in the house to be kept spotlessly clean, and all other requirements to be followed to the letter. If any of his high standards were not met, he stormed off in a rage, yelling at his wife at the top of his lungs. He made life miserable for her.

After about three years, the husband passed away unexpectedly. Eventually, the widow married a caring Christian man, who was the complete opposite of her first husband. She was so happy that she wanted to do all she could to show her gratitude for what she had never experienced with her first husband.

One day, it dawned on her that she was doing the very same things for her second husband that she had done for the first: fixing his meals the way he liked them, ironing his clothes, etc.—things that had at one time been demanded of her. Only this time, with her second husband, she was doing them out of love, not because someone was “laying down the law.”

A person who lives primarily by law and a person who lives primarily by love both live obedient lives. But one of those approaches is much more satisfying—the subject of the current lesson.

LESSON CONTEXT: Romans

The current lesson text from Romans is from a section of the book that is more practical (what we are to do) than doctrinal (what we are to believe) in content as Paul shifts focus. Chapter 12 begins this section by challenging readers to offer themselves as “a living sacrifice” (Romans 12:1). What follows describes what that kind of life should look like in a Christian’s daily conduct.

In the seven verses in Romans 13 that precede the first segment of the lesson text, Paul examined a topic of special interest to Christians of any century: our attitude toward civic authorities. The key concept

here is one of obligation, which Paul uses to make a transition from how we are to relate to those authorities to how we are to relate to one another.

LESSON CONTEXT: 1 Corinthians

First Corinthians 13, the second of two segments of the lesson, features Paul's timeless and matchless explanation of Christian love. The larger context of this chapter is Paul's discussion of spiritual gifts in chapters 12–14. Possession and use of spiritual gifts had become a source of great contention within the Corinthian church. Paul was concerned that undue focus on these gifts could distract the Corinthian believers from more crucial concerns. Should that happen, the result would be a fracturing of the unity in Christ that is to characterize followers of Jesus.

Love and Law: Romans 13:8–10

When Paul's said, "let no debt remain outstanding," he spoke of honoring one's commitments. But the disapproval of monetary indebtedness is not the main point here. Rather, the phrasing sets up a contrast with the second part of this half verse regarding what should *never* be considered paid off: the obligation to love. Love among fellow believers is to be a primary characteristic of Christians (John 13:34–35; 1 John 3:14).

In verse 8b of today's lesson Paul adds that when we practice love, there is really no need for any other laws, because love covers it all! If we love others, we will not sin against them. And as believers, we do not live under the law; we live under grace. Our motive for obeying God and helping others is the love of Christ in our hearts.

1. What did the Apostle Paul say about love and the law? (Romans 13:8)

In verse 9, Paul cites The Ten Commandments (Decalogue) found in Exodus 20:1–17 and Deuteronomy 5:6–21. We note that the positive command to *love your neighbor as yourself* is framed in terms of several *you shall not* negative commands (compare Matthew 19:18). This implies that a foundation of neighbor-love is a commitment to do no harm. But Christian love is not simply refusing to hurt someone else; it is also active as it works for the good of others, as included in the statement *whatever other command there may be*.

As we commit ourselves to such love such a neighbor, we will define neighbor-love as Jesus did in Luke 10:25–37: meeting the needs of those we encounter. Such love fulfills what Jesus called the second of the two greatest commandments, on which "all the Law and the Prophets hang" (Matthew 22:39–40; compare Leviticus 19:18). This is "the royal law found in Scripture" (James 2:8).

2. What did Paul say about loving your neighbor? (Romans 13:9–10)

What Do You Think?

Whom do you love better: yourself or your neighbor?

Digging Deeper

What heart change is required to be able to bring these loves into proper balance?

In verse 10 of today's lesson Paul repeats what he has said previously. Therefore, verse 10 serves as a kind of bookend to wrap up his line of thought before he makes a transition to another topic.

Love and Spiritual Gifts: 1 Corinthians 13:8–13

Love is to be given priority in practice because it possesses much greater "staying power" than spiritual giftedness. Love *never fails* in the sense of expiring or becoming unnecessary. Unlike many of the spiritual gifts, love will never be outdated, unnecessary, or eliminated. *Prophecies knowledge*, and *tongues* were not permanent gifts. (Knowledge does not mean "education," but the immediate imparting of spiritual

truth to the mind.) These three gifts often went together. God would impart knowledge to the prophet, and he would give the message in a tongue. Then an interpreter (sometimes the prophet himself) would explain the message. These were gifts that some of the Corinthians prized, especially the gift of tongues. Spiritual gifts, no matter how exciting and wonderful, are useless and even destructive if they are not ministered in love.

These gifts will fail (be abolished) and cease, but love will endure forever; for "God is love" (1 John 4:8, 16).

3. Why should love have priority over spiritual gifts? (1 Corinthians 13:8)

Verses 9 and 10 begin a deeper dive in examining why spiritual gifts are of lesser value than the imperative to love. The relative valuations are seen in the contrast between the phrases *in part* (three times) and *when completeness*.

In the New Testament (which at that time was not completed) we have a complete revelation, but our understanding of it is partial. (Review 1 Cor. 8:1-3 if you think otherwise.) There is a maturing process for the church as a whole (Eph. 4:11-16) and also for the individual believer (1 Cor. 14:20; 2 Peter 3:18). We will not have full *completeness* until Jesus returns, but we ought to be growing and maturing now. At Jesus' second coming, the temporary things God provides for our spiritual growth now will no longer be necessary.

4. Why would these gifts cease? (1 Corinthians 13:9–10)

The apostle illustrates his point by likening it to the maturation of a person from infancy to manhood. A child speaks, reasons, and assimilates knowledge at the level of his maturity. The apostle goes on to say *when I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me*. A child's speech is undeveloped, his understanding crude, and knowledge incomplete. At the time his attention is focused upon developing the skill of speech, coming to terms with truth and assimilating knowledge. But when the child becomes a man his speech becomes subject to his mind, his understanding is temperate, and his knowledge complete. Paul is not implying that they had reached or attained that level of maturity but, similar to Philippians 3:7-15, that is the end toward which they should be striving.

5. How did Paul illustrate spiritual maturity? (1 Corinthians 13:11)

What Do You Think?

In what sense(s) should we put childish things behind us?

Digging Deeper

In what sense(s) should we strive to remain childlike (example: Matthew 18:3)?

Mirrors of the first century A.D. were made of polished metal, yielding dim and distorted reflections. Paul uses this to illustrate what is known *in part*. This contrast, again, is with what he will eventually (*then*) know fully as dim reflection gives way to full clarity (*face to face*). Again, the apostle understands that complete maturity will not be achieved until we see the Lord face to face. At that time we will not only achieve complete maturity but perfect knowledge. As Paul puts it, *then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known*.

As Paul brings his discussion of Christian love to its conclusion (v. 13), he emphasizes once more that which *remain* (endures). If the present Christian experience were to be reduced to these three essential qualities they would be *faith, hope, and love*. But the greatest of these graces is love; because when you love someone, you will trust them and will always be anticipating new joys. Faith, hope, and love go together, but it is love that energizes faith and hope.

6. What else did Paul use to illustrate our maturity in faith? (1 Corinthians 13:12-13)

CONCLUSION

The Clarity of Love

The actions and attitudes of Christian love improve our spiritual view in critical areas. Without it, we are somewhat like the man in the village of Bethsaida to whom Jesus gave sight in a two-stage miracle (Mark 8:22–26). After “stage one,” Jesus asked him if he could see anything. The man replied, “I see men as trees, walking.” After “stage two,” the man could see clearly. Jesus was not content to leave the man’s ability to see in stage one. Neither is Jesus content that our own spiritual vision remains partially obscured regarding whom we should or should not extend His love through our own attitudes and actions.

The process can be seen as two mutually reinforcing, upward-spiraling reciprocals. First, as the clarity of our spiritual vision improves, we will begin to see increased opportunities to express the love of Christ to others; and as we express that love, the clarity of our spiritual vision will be improved.

Second, this improved vision will cause us to see that to minister to others in love is to serve God (Matthew 25:34–40); “But whoever loves God is known by God” (1 Corinthians 8:3; compare and contrast Galatians 4:9; 1 John 4:19–21).

Because of Christ’s love, we do not view people as the world does. We see them as those for whom Jesus gave His life and who need “the message of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:19). The same love moves us to respond to those in need (1 John 3:16–18), the kind of “neighbor love” modeled by the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:33).

Those who have been baptized into Christ “have clothed [ourselves] with Christ.” Given that fact, it is (or should be) only natural also to “put on love” as Paul told the Colossian Christians to do (Colossians 3:14).

What Do You Think?

What opportunities will you take to love Jesus’ followers this week?

Digging Deeper

What will you do this week to love your neighbors—including your enemies?

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, we live in a time where love is perhaps more desperately sought after than ever before. Forgive us when we become callous to the needs around us. Help us to follow the example of Jesus and to see others as He sees them. In His name we pray. Amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

Love remains the primary form of “ID” for the follower of Jesus (see John 13:35).

ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON

Next week’s lesson is “**Freedom from the World**” and teaches us how to continue to live our lives in Christ, rooted and built up in Him, strengthened in the faith! Study Colossians 2:6–23.