

THE LETTER THAT CHANGED THE WORLD - The Biblical Theology of Romans - Part fifty

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LOVE AND THE FULFILLING OF THE LAW

Romans 13:8-10 - "Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. [9] For the commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,' and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' [10] Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law."

These verses have an obvious connection with last week's teaching on the Christian and government. **Verse seven** repeats the subject of "**owing**" debts four times. In terms of life under divinely instituted human government we must come to terms faithfully with **owing** taxes, revenue, respect and honor (**7**). Governments don't pay for themselves. Earthly systems require **finance** ("taxes" and "revenue") and they require willing **submission** ("respect" and "honor") if they're to work at all. And God, says Paul, **wants** them to work.

The fundamental concept here is the Christian and his or her **duty** to earthly authorities and governments. I may or may not **like** the form of government under which I live. I may be a conservative under a very liberal government. I may be a monarchist living under a democratic government, or vice-versa. So there may or may not be **agreement** with my particular **form** of government. But I **must** pay my taxes and I **must** do all I can to honor those in leadership over me. **Taxes** will probably be the law and no one who follows Christ can be **disrespectful** to his or her government.

But there's no **love** required in these duties. I must **honor** my leaders, true enough. But I honor them, not because I necessarily **love** them, but because of the **office** they hold under God's providence. The **office** is worthy of respect, even if those who **hold** that office are not. It's just a matter of my **duty** under God.

And it's right at this point that we see today's text offering not only **continuity** with **13:1-7**, but **contrast**. Today Paul presses much deeper. As he moves beyond my duty to **government** in particular to relationships in general, he stretches the borders to how we are to treat "**each other**"(**8**). And he probably doesn't mean to limit these instructions to how we treat other **Christians**. He's talking about how we relate to our **neighbor**, as Jesus defined neighbors in the parable of the good Samaritan. So these instructions are to exclude "**no one**"(**8a**).

1) THE REALM OF LOVE IS ALWAYS DEEPER AND MORE DEMANDING THAN THE REALM OF DUTY

Romans 13:8 - "Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law."

We know from Paul's earlier words in Romans that no one actually fulfills the law perfectly in this life - **Romans 3:20** - "**For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.**" We can't qualify in God's sight by law-keeping. We can't be justified on the legal pathway because we never **keep** the whole law.

So what does Paul mean when he says the "**one who loves another has fulfilled the law**"? He means love is what sets the direction of my life before God. Love is what God **looks** for. The one who loves is setting his or her life in the direction that keeping the law always intended. Or, to put it in the negative, love is what keeps us from **breaking** the law. If you act out of love you will, from the inside out, tear up the **roots** of lawlessness.

This is so important because it shatters the myth, the myth believed by many sincere Christians, that because we are redeemed by Christ we can **forget** about the law. We can **ignore** the law because we've been saved and indwelt by the Holy Spirit.

Nothing could be more opposite to the truth. Love never **ignores** the law of God. There is a right and a wrong way to live before God. And we must live - **all** of us must live - the right way before God. There are **requirements** to holiness. God's will never changes for His children.

And anyone who thinks the walk of love is **less** rigorous than the walk of the law doesn't understand either the **nature of love** or the **teaching of Jesus**. True, love takes the **burden** of the law **as a means of being justified** and sets our hearts free from that condemnation. So there is a sense in which God's commands cease, as John says, to be a **burden**. But they don't cease to **exist**. Rather, the righteousness under the yoke of Christ is as much **deeper** as it is more **joyful**. We'll come back to this in a few minutes.

2) **THESE VERSES OUTLINE ONE OF THE KEY TESTS OF THE LIFE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT IN THE HUMAN HEART**

Romans 13:8 - "Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law."

So there are debts we are *not* to carry through life and there is a debt we *all* must carry. The debt we all *have* and must all *feel* is the debt of love to others. This debt of love is to somehow *drive* the rest of our actions. We are to be as compelled by it as we are by a mortgage or a credit card obligation. In other words, this debt of love mustn't be treated as something *optional* or something that can be paid off whenever we get around to it. That's why Paul links his teaching on *love* with his teaching on *paying taxes*.

This isn't the first time Paul talked about the propelling power of this debt in his own life. His first mention of it in this letter is in **Romans 1:14** - "I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish." Many translations will actually use the word "*debtor*" - "*I am a debtor both to Greeks and barbarians....*" It's the same word Paul uses in Romans chapter 13 when he speaks of the *debt we owe* to each other - the debt of love.

Paul had received marvelous grace. He was a rebel and blasphemer of Christ. He deserved nothing but God's wrath and judgment. But that's not what Paul got from God. He received mercy and forgiveness and marvelous love.

And here's the point. That grace didn't just give Paul his *forgiveness*. It gave Paul his *mission*. Paul knew that just as *he* so desperately needed God's grace in the gospel, *everyone else* needed it to. And that put Paul in *debt*. He *owed* everyone the same transforming, freeing, renewing grace of God that he had received. He *knew* the truth and the source of that grace. Others didn't. And there was Paul's debt.

We're more comfortable talking about the *call* of God to serve Him than we are talking about the *debt* of the gospel on all our lives. We like to think of being *saved* by grace and being *called* to mission as being *two distinct events*. But in today's text Paul treats them as hand in glove experiences. To *receive* grace at all is to be placed under *obligation*. Ironically, it's the very *freeness* of the gospel that places us in such *debt*.

3) **TO KEEP THE COMMANDS OF THE LAW WITHOUT CHRIST'S LOVE IS USEFUL IN MAINTAINING ORDER IN SOCIETY, BUT USELESS IN TERMS OF PLEASING GOD**

Romans 13:8-9 - "Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another 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 any other commandment, are summed up in this word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Perhaps these verses cut to the heart of much confusion in the body of Christ. How important is keeping the law? It's very important, as much as it lies within us to keep it. The law forbids murder and theft and adultery and bribery. The law places safeguards around our rights and loves as human beings - both Christian and non-Christian. So there is great value in keeping the law.

But the law can't make us right with God. Paul has already said so - **Romans 3:20** - "For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin." Nobody will be saved through the law. And even if we *could* keep the law - or at least *most* of it - we *still* wouldn't be made right with God because the keeping of the law only reaches the *outside* of our actions. It may clean up the *outside* of the cup, but never the *inside*.

I think this is often missed when we consider righteousness of life. Consider **1 Corinthians 13:1-3** - "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. [2] And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. [3] If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing."

Just ponder those last three words - "*I gain nothing....*" What can Paul mean? Does he mean no one would be helped by my philanthropy? Could people not be fed and clothed, or educated? Could I not write helpful books if I had all knowledge and understood all mysteries? Would it be nothing at all to share with the world the cause and cure for cancer? What can Paul mean when he shocks us and says, "*I gain nothing!*"

He means **he himself** would gain nothing. His deeds would not pile up any merit before God. **Others** might gain, to be sure, but Paul himself would be unchanged and unhelped in his relationship with God. You see, God looks at deeds **from their source** rather than **in their bare actions**. And without love I would give away my goods and be looking for a tax benefit. I would perhaps use my universal knowledge to cure cancer, but could also turn to using it to rule the world. If I truly had the power to do all these things but existed with a fallen heart, I, above all other people, should be feared.

On the other hand, if I have the love of Christ in a transformed heart I can be trusted to do all the good I can possibly do, and **none of the evil**. So it's not that Christians don't think about keeping the law. We **know** this to be so because Paul is writing to **Christians** and he is **quoting the law - Romans 13:9** - "The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet," and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"

These are important laws for the Christian. But they must be kept from the **inside out**. If I love you I won't rob you. But, unlike the keeping of the bare law, I also won't **harbor envy or anger against you either**. If the law says I mustn't **rob** you I won't. But, in the power of love, I'll also **look out for your needs and treat you as lavishly as I would treat myself**. This is the kind of thinking Jesus was trying to inject into the **law-bound** minds of the religious Pharisees.

4) THE DEBT OF LOVE IS THE ONLY DEBT THAT GROWS AS YOU PAY IT BACK

Romans 13:10 - "Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law."

Once you pay your taxes they're paid. Once you pay off your mortgage, you don't have to pay it anymore. Pay off a credit card and you can just cut it in two if you so like. That's the nature of all other debts.

But who ever pays off the debt of love? In fact, as many discover in the marriage relationship, the more you do loving things for your spouse, the more you **love** your spouse, and the more you are drawn into doing **more** loving things to **reveal** your growing love.

Love always **expands** as it is **expressed**. And suddenly the mystery starts to dissolve. We start to see why the greatest command isn't to **obey** God, which perhaps a robot could be programed to do. The greatest command is to **love** God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength.

So the next time you read those oft repeated words in the New Testament, "**love is the fulfilling of the law,**" get a picture of a cup put under a gushing tap. And it's just **held** there, never taken away. The water just **fills** the cup, and spills over the side. The cup **does** get filled, to be sure. The law will be kept in the loving heart. But that's not all. It's the overflow that brings the life joy and gladness in the pursuit of loving holiness. And people are blessed under the overflow of the Holy Spirit's presence in your loving heart.