

ROMANS

Part 27: “The Ultimacy and Urgency of Love”

Romans 13:8–14

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Sunday, October 2, 2022 (Ordinary Time)

Scripture Reading

“Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. 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.’ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law. Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires” (Rom 13:8–14).

Introduction

There was once a young man who grew up in a small town and went to college in a big city. Despite the tearful prayers of his godly mother, he plunged himself into a cauldron of immorality and sin, where he indulged his every desire. He flirted with non-Christian philosophies and non-Christian religions, all the while chasing a career as a scholar and professor.

Yet, despite his debauchery, none could deny that this young man possessed a brilliant mind. At a young age, he found a job in a faraway city filled with significant and powerful people. While in this city, his curiosity provoked him to visit a local church, where a famous pastor would preach on Sundays.

So, he began attending. He heard the gospel taught from the words of Scripture, and he began to understand the brilliance of the Bible for the first time. But he also listened to the way the pastor was able to engage with the big ideas and questions of the day. In other words, the gospel was not only becoming clearer—it was becoming more and more personally relevant to this young man.

One afternoon, he found himself weeping in his backyard over the spiritual angst he was beginning to feel. Then, he heard a voice. Perhaps it was a child in a nearby yard; perhaps it was even an angel. The voice said, *“Take and read.”*

The young man went inside his home. He picked up the first book he saw, which was a volume containing all the letters of the Apostle Paul. He opened the book randomly to the book of Romans. And the man history would later remember as Augustine of Hippo became a Christian.

Augustine would become arguably the greatest Christian theologian of all time [show Augustine]. And if there is one idea he is most famous for, it would be his theology of love. According to Augustine, love is at the very heart of the Christian faith. Disordered love leads to death and destruction. But rightly ordered love leads to true life and true joy.

And there is no better place to explore the importance of love within Christianity than in the passage Augustine read on the day of his conversion—which happens to be the same passage we are studying today.

Throughout this year, we have been exploring the book of Romans, which is the Apostle Paul’s longest New Testament letter. It is a letter that details the power and the glory of the gospel. Like a brilliant symphony, the book of Romans is broken into distinct movements that unfold themes like the tyranny of sin and death, the revelation of the righteousness of God, and the mystery of God’s redemptive plan.

Now, in this final movement within Romans, Paul takes a profoundly practical turn. He will now unveil how Christians are to live in light of the gospel. And in today's passage, in particular, we will witness “The Ultimacy and the Urgency of Love” within the Christian life.

Exposition

1.) Ultimacy of Love

“Ultimacy” refers to that which is ultimate, utmost, and fundamentally important. Love, then, is the highest good and highest goal of the Christian life. It is the central work to which God calls his people.

Love is essential to Christianity. Love is the vibrant fountainhead of the Christian life. It is the motivating power behind every true act of righteousness. Love is the essence of the living sacrifice of spiritual worship to which God calls us (cf. Rom 12:1).

Throughout the book of Romans, the Apostle Paul has been showing us repeatedly that we are not saved by our righteous works. We are saved by the righteousness of God that has been revealed in Jesus Christ!

Thus, we are not made righteous by our own works, even by our works of love. Rather, we are made righteous by faith—by trusting in the perfect work of Christ.

Nevertheless, while we are justified by faith alone, justifying faith never stands alone. True faith, and saving faith necessarily leads to works. And as Paul writes in Galatians, *faith works through love* (cf. Gal 5:6).

Our lives have been delivered and reclaimed from the power of sin. As Paul says in Romans 8, we are no longer debtors to the flesh. Nevertheless, we are debtors who owe everything to God, and what he requires of us is explicit in this passage. Paul writes, **“Owe no one anything, except to love each other”** (Rom 13:8a).

To love is to will and seek the highest good of another. In this way, the gospel itself is rooted in the very love of God. While we were enslaved to the powers of sin and death, God willed and sought our highest good. While we were still his enemies and sinners, Christ died for us (cf. Rom 5:8).

The Christian life, then, is a life lived in imitation of the love of God. We are to see ourselves as beloved children who walk in love as Christ has loved us (Eph 5:1). Love is the defining mark of Christian discipleship (John 13:35). It is the one thing we must not miss. As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 13 (perhaps the most famous biblical passage on love): **“If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 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. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing** (1 Cor 13:1–3).

Our world is often impatient, irritable, cruel, beguiled by self-interest and fueled by resentment. We are tempted live in reactionary response to our worst fears and that which incites our most unforgiving rage. In our relationships, we often assume the worst of one another. We are quick to abandon one another when difficulty arises.

Against this endless cycle of pettiness, pain, and pride, the love that flows from the heart of God and through the lives of his people shines like a bright supernova in lifeless vacuum of darkness. For, **“Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things”** (1 Cor 13:4–7).

Even more, love is the end, the perfection, and the fulfillment of all the requirements of God's righteous law. Instead of viewing Christian obedience as merely *not doing* the wrong things, Paul calls Christians to view obedience as *loving* the right things.

Our passage reads: **“... for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. 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.’ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law”** (Rom 13:8b–10).

Here, the word of God is inviting us into a new way of understanding sin. Sin is not just the breaking of God's law. Sin, as our friend Augustine would say, is *disordered love*.

Adultery, murder, theft, and *all* of the sins prohibited in the ten commandments are branches that feed into the same root—disordered love. We sin when we fail to acknowledge and love God for who he has revealed himself to be. We sin when we love our comfort, our convenience, our significance more than we love our neighbors, who have intersected our lives by God's providence.

In this way, the word of God gives us a powerful diagnostic tool for us to use in times of prayer and self-reflection. It is helpful to ask yourself, "In what ways am I most tempted to sin?" For some, your greatest temptation might be lust. For others, that temptation might be anger, laziness, or pride.

But don't just name your temptation. Go down to the roots. Ask yourself the question, "How is my sin rooted in a disordered love?" In other words, ask yourself how your sinful thoughts, words, and behaviors are connected to your failure to love rightly.

Then, come before the Lord in prayer and rest in the grace and freedom he freely gives! Confess the ways you have failed to love God with your whole heart. Confess the ways you have failed to love your neighbor as yourself. And then pray that the Spirit of God would fill you with resurrected life and resurrected love.

The good news is that God is in the business of creating new hearts.

In fact, the Old Testament recounts the story of one of the greatest sins of one of its greatest heroes. David, the shepherd who slew the giant, the man after God's own heart, the greatest of all Israel's kings, was not a man who was above sin.

In the span of one chapter, 2 Samuel 11, David covets another man's wife, steals another man's wife, commits adultery with another man's wife, and murders the man to whom the wife belonged. In essence, he breaks every single biblical command that Paul happens to mention in Romans 14:9.

A prophet confronts David for his sins. King David feels the conviction and consequences of his sins, and he then proceeds to write the most powerful and poignant prayers in all of Scripture, which is found in Psalm 51.

While I encourage you to read and pray Psalm 51 in its entirety, I want to encourage you to write the words of Psalm 51:10 on the tablet of your heart, wherein the repentant David writes, "*Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me*" (Ps 51:10).

Sin twists and tarnishes our hearts to give way to desires that lead us only to pain and death. But our situation is not hopeless, for God is merciful. The Lord is willing and able to resurrect our lives and restore our loves.

2.) The Urgency of Love

The word "urgency" refers to something so important that it demands swift and un-delayed action. And if the gospel is true, if Jesus has risen from the dead, if the kingdom of God is at hand, what could possibly be more urgent than to order our hearts and our loves according to the gospel?

As Paul passionately expresses in this passage, *"Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light"* (Rom 13:11–12).

Christ has already defeated the powers of sin and death through his resurrection. However, the full reality of his victory is not yet felt in all creation. There is a day coming when sin and death will not only be defeated, they will be vanquished. And, as the people of God, we are called to live in our present moment, fully awakened to the glorious future that awaits us in Christ.

For a moment, imagine you were an Austrian living in the mid-1900s. Nazi Germany has claimed your land and your people for their own. Against your desires and against your will, you have been conscripted to fight in the Nazi army (and this did happen to many people during World War 2). But after years of being under the dominion of evil, you heard that the Allies have invaded Normandy. They liberated France and are advancing on Germany. Hitler has fled Berlin. Now, the Nazis have yet to surrender, but the outcome is already certain.

The question is: what should you do? I think your first course of action would be to take off your Nazi uniform and to do so quickly.

So too, Jesus has overcome the powers of sin and death. His ultimate victory is certain. It is time to live in light of that coming victory. Now is the time to order our lives according to the new regime. That means it's time to take off and cast off the works of darkness. As citizens of the coming age, it is no longer appropriate to clothe ourselves with works of sin.

Paul writes, *"Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy"* (Rom 13:13).¹ Such practices belong to a pagan people enslaved to a pagan way of life under the dominion of pagan gods. These practices do not become the people of God who are destined for eternal glory.

¹ Note: "For the Christian, anger and bitterness are just as much forbidden as drunkenness and off-limits sexual activity, though you wouldn't think so from many churches." Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone: Romans, Part 2: Chapters 9-16* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 90.

Instead, the Apostle commands, *“But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires”* (Rom 13:14).²

To “put on” Christlikeness takes practice. We have been conditioned, programmed, and trained to live according to the standards and norms of a world under the dominion of sin and death. It takes intentionality and effort to learn new norms and new habits. But Christ has sent his Holy Spirit to be our helper.

To put on Christ means that our identity is in Christ and our allegiance is to Christ. For this reason, it is crucial for Christians to remember their baptism. (Later this morning, we will witness several baptisms. If you are a Christian, this is a moment to remember what your baptism means). It is important to remember that we have been united with Christ in his death and resurrection. Sin has no dominion over us!

To put on Christ means we acknowledge where we are tempted and weak. To put on Christ means that we are to draw near to God that he would draw near to us; that we humble ourselves before him so that he might lift us up. It means we ask for Christ's grace, power, and intercession.

To put on Christ means we ask for the Spirit to bear his fruit within us; for the fruit of the Spirit is the character of Christ. As Paul writes elsewhere, *“...the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law”* (Gal 5:22–23).

Likewise, the final command of this passage is that we must not make any provision for the flesh. Remember, the flesh is the part of us that is still susceptible to sin, deceived by sin, and desirous of sin.

The flesh is often loud and demanding. Sometimes we think we can satisfy the flesh by giving it just a little bit of what it wants. But we are to make no provision for the flesh. We are not to in any way accommodate or negotiate with the flesh. In fact, we are to crucify the flesh.

This means we are to seek community and counsel that hold us accountable. We are to put loving limits upon ourselves where we are prone to weakness. We are to make a disciplined commitment to integrity, character, and godliness. Dependent upon the grace of the Holy Spirit, we are to aim the loves of our heart unto that which is good and true and beautiful. And we are to do so *now*.

If we truly knew the joy that awaits us in eternity, we would not waste another moment flirting with the petty sins of lesser loves. As C.S. Lewis once wrote: *“...it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires, not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling around with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he*

² This is the very verse that Augustine of Hippo credits with provoking his repentance and faith.

cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at sea. We are far too easily satisfied.”³

Conclusion

If we are honest with ourselves and one another, we have all been too easily satisfied with that which will never satisfy us.

All of us have been woefully lacking in our love for God and for one another. In ourselves, we are estranged from God. But where our love is fleeting and faltering—the love of God does not fail. As John 3:16 famously says, *“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life”* (John 3:16).

Christ has perfectly loved his Father and perfectly fulfilled all the righteous requirements of the law. He has loved us perfectly and, in love, accomplished the work of redemption by dying for our sins and rising again for our salvation.

So, praise God that we are not saved by the perfection of our love. We are saved by the perfection of Christ’s love!

We only need to trust that his work is enough. So, I want to invite you: if you feel the Spirit of the Lord beckoning you to follow him, today is the day of salvation. Do not waste any time. None of us are guaranteed our next breath.

Today, trust in Christ for your salvation and forgiveness. Turn away from the sins that will never satisfy you. Be baptized into the Lord Jesus Christ. Live in light of his kingdom. Embrace the ultimacy and urgency of love. Rest in God’s grace.

Augustine once prayed to God, *“You have made us for yourself; our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.”*

Redeemer Christian Church, may find our rest in the God who made us and calls us to redemption. May we remember that love is our highest good and highest aim. May we live as those fully awakened to the coming kingdom of God. May we put on the Lord Jesus Christ, who loved us while we were still his enemies.

AMEN.

³ C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (New York: HarperOne, 1949), 26.

Discussion Starters for Gospel Communities

1. Read Romans 13:8–10. How would you define love? What is the relationship of love to the law of God in this set of Scriptures?
2. What happens when our loves are disordered?
3. Read Romans 13:11–14. What does it mean to "cast off" works of darkness? What is the motivation for doing so, according to this passage?
4. What does it look like to "put on" the Lord Jesus Christ in practical terms?
5. Are we able to love God and one another perfectly? Why is the perfection of Christ's love such good news?