



Westminster Presbyterian Church
 Knoxville, TN
 Sept. 10, 2023
 The Rev. Dr. Richard Coble
 Sermon: "Commerce and Community"

Romans 13:8-14 (NRSV)

13:8 Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.

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, "Love your neighbor as yourself."

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

13:11 Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers;

13:12 the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light;

13:13 let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy.

13:14 Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

"Commerce and Community"

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The Greek word Paul uses for ‘the fulfilling’ is a present participle, meaning that as one loves, one fulfills the law. Love, in other words, is an action, rather than a state of being, a feeling, a sentiment.

In the New Testament, love is not so much a warm and fuzzy feeling as it is a series of actions and a way of being with others. When Jesus says, “Love your enemies,” he doesn’t ask us to force a feeling. Have you ever tried to fall in love with an enemy? It usually doesn’t work.

Rather, as one commentator I read this week put it, “To love someone is actively to promote that person’s good.”¹

Or, in Paul’s most famous words on love, “Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” 1 Cor. 13.

My next-door neighbor is a man named Kevin. Just ‘Kevin.’ I’ve lived next door to Kevin for six weeks; I don’t know Kevin’s last name; I don’t know his spouse’s name or his kids’ names – I think he has kids; to be honest, I’m not completely sure. Kevin is fairly quiet. And when I’m not being paid to be an extravert in front of 200 people, truth be told, I can be a bit shy myself. It’s going to take some time to get to know Kevin.

We’ve had two interactions; the first one was a conversation about who mows the no-man’s-land where a drainage pipe runs through the middle of our two properties; we agreed to take turns.

The second conversation was a life-saver. Lindsey and I had purchased a large table for the house. I’d rented a truck; 2 salespeople had helped me load it. Yes, we had measured it, but somehow that table got larger and heavier on the truck than it was in the store, funny how that always seems to happen. When I got the truck home, of course, it was just me, Lindsey, Joseph, and Auden – Joseph and Auden, aged 7 and 3 respectively. Lindsey got up on the truck bed, and she could lift it up but it was a struggle. I had no idea how we would get it off and get it in, until Kevin just walked over. I should probably mention, Kevin’s a good 6’5, 30 years old, mostly

¹ Paul J. Achtemeier, *Romans: Interpretation A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1985), 203-207.

muscle. I don't remember him even asking if we needed help. He assessed the situation, got up in the truck, and together we moved the table in the house.

I don't have warm, fuzzy feelings for Kevin. We're not there yet in our relationship. But Kevin showed that love for neighbor is an action on a hot Saturday afternoon last week.

“Love is the fulfilling of the law,” says Paul. Of course, Paul, being Paul, does *not* say the reverse is true: simply follow the law and that counts as love. For most of the book of Romans, Paul is arguing against works-righteousness, the idea that we can save ourselves by following the law. As Paul puts it, we “are not under law but under grace,” Romans 6:14.

But there are times when I confuse law for love, or I think, if I can just get by with law, following the rules, working hard, that will be enough. I'll get to love sometime later.

Have you ever relied on law and put love on the backburner?

Mainline pastors around the country have been arguing with each other online this week about a blog post written by a pastor leaving the pastorate. If this is the first time you are hearing about the debate, I envy you. Nothing can be more disheartening, after working all week in the church, than to come home and read about pastors arguing with other pastors about pastoring.

The blog post is by Alexander Lang, former pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Arlington Heights, entitled, “Departure: Why I Left the Church.”²

I saw it for the first time after church on Sunday. By mid-week, the post had been read 130,000 times. Needless to say, it hit a nerve.

In the post, Lang is brutally honest about why he is going to stop working as a pastor. Many people in our profession saw themselves and their struggles in his post; others thought he was being disingenuous, misleading, or simply asked why he had not sought support or utilized the resources available to a pastor in his position. First Presbyterian Arlington Heights is a 1000-member church.

² Alexander Lang, “Departure: Why I Left the Church.” *Restorative Faith*. Updated Sept. 3, 2023. <https://www.restorativefaith.org/post/departure-why-i-left-the-church>

I'll quote a few of his complaints (these are direct quotes from the blog post):

- You don't just have one boss...In practice, your boss is every person who walks through the door of your community. When everyone likes what you're doing, it may not feel that way, but the moment a group of people become discontent with your messages or decisions, then you feel the weight of their leverage over your life.
- You are expected to be a pillar of virtue, meaning you must be blameless or morally pure. Your spouse and your children should all be perfect or close to it.
- In my previous congregation, [he says], a member who was a former state senator for the Pennsylvania legislature refused to volunteer for our boards because he felt that church boards were too cutthroat.
- Beyond all of these day-to-day tasks, you serve as a Master of Ceremonies at baptisms, weddings, and funerals, which means you rarely get a break as these events often happen on weekends.

The list goes on. It is an exhausting read, and often heartbreaking.

To be sure, I see many of my own perfectionist, people-pleasing, conflict avoidant tendencies articulated in the post. Because I too struggle with following law without love. Do you ever struggle, with following law without love?

As if we could save ourselves by our own efforts.

When we put everything on our shoulders, when we forget the love and grace and Spirit of God, church and community become a commodity that we sell, parishioners become customers to please, councils become boards to satisfy, and everything rests on the individual to meet these demands, to save the church.

Everything rests on the individual, not the community and certainly not God.

These are myths fueled by the laws of consumerism, where everything is a commodity to be sold. Especially in our religious landscape, where there is fear in the system, with church participation and membership rolls around the country are falling steeply, it is easy to forget, easy for anyone who loves the church and wants to see it flourish, to forget; it is easy for me to forget, that this is a community gathered and saved by grace, not a commodity to be sold.

Our modern version of works-righteousness.

And it's not just the church, is it? I think Pastor Lang is wrong when he writes that his struggles are particular to the pastorate. We all live and work and have our being in a world that determines our value based on our output. A world of budgets, numbers, and quotas that can treat us like things rather than people: the never-ending demands of the office, the requirement to have a picture-perfect family, the pressure never to struggle in this life or to show that you are struggling, the pressure never to fall behind, the shame we are told to feel when we fall behind.

Again, our modern version of works-righteousness

Law without love.

(slow): Law without love.

But the Gospel tells us, we are not saved by our works, by our performance. And therefore ultimately, the salvation of the church does not rest on our shoulders. The salvation of the church and this world rests on the savior.

It is Christ who sets the heart on fire for the love of God.

It is the Spirit who gathered us here today.

It is God who will call generations after us to gather in Jesus's name.

As Paul says, "salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers."

And yet, "love is the fulfilling of the law."

Love is a response to the grace of God, not done out of desperation for salvation. "Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Romans ch. 5.

Through love, we do not throw up our hands in apathy or resignation. We do not, listen to me closely here, *we do not* resign our committee seats. We do not stop sweating it out week after week for beautiful music, caring congregations, meaningful worship. Rather, we are called to serve the church, the world, and one another out of love and not fear, out of love and not law. Or rather, love is the fulfilling of the law.

For love is not simply a fuzzy feeling; it is a series of actions and a way of being with one another.

Through love, we carry on the tradition.
We hand down the faith.
We follow our vocations, in and outside of these walls.
We care for our family and our siblings in Christ.
We dream together of new programs and possibilities.
We work towards ever more inclusive and just systems.

We do this, not because we carry the weight of the world on our shoulders. Not because we have to prove ourselves, not in order to chase an impossible dream of perfection.

We do this, as a way of responding to the grace of God, freely given, rather than earned.

We do this out of love. We do this out of love. And we trust God with the rest.
Amen.