

Great Themes in Discipleship, #4

"Living a Life of Love and Obedience"

Rom. 13:8-14

--CEFC 2/27/22

Peter in his second letter,

is writing with the awareness that his time with the believers he is addressing

is short.

So he encourages them to stand firm in the faith

and to press on in pursuit of godliness.

“For if you do these things,” he writes, “you will never stumble,

and you will receive a rich welcome

into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

So I will always remind you of these things,

even though you know them

and are firmly established in the truth you now have.

I think it is right to refresh your memory as long as I live in the tent of this body,

And I will make every effort to see that after my departure

you will always be able to remember these things” (2 Pet. 1:10-15).

I can't say how much longer I have to live “in the tent of this body,”

but I do know that my departure from Annandale is fast approaching,

so I share Peter's desire.

During my last few months as your pastor,

I want to remind you of things you already know

so that you always be able to remember them. /

I've entitled this sermon series, "Great Themes in Discipleship,"

but it is really simply a summary of the great themes of the gospel.

More than anything, I want to remind you of the good news

that the God who is frightfully holy

has purposed through his grace, and his grace alone,

to send his Son Jesus Christ into this world

to rescue us from our sin

and to bring us into an eternal relationship with himself.

He calls everyone everywhere to turn to him in repentance and faith

and to put their trust in the Lord Jesus.

More than that, he sends his Spirit to cause us to be born again

empowering us to live a new life,

with a new purpose

and with a certain hope of a glorious eternal destiny.

I want you always to remember these things.

This morning we continue this gospel theme

by considering that new life to which we are called—

a life of love and obedience,

a life that is full of hope as we look to the coming day. //

We being in Rom. 13:8, where Paul says, "**Let no debt remain outstanding**"—

He has just made that point

regarding our obligations as citizens in this world in v. 7.

We must be faithful to pay off any debts we may have.

But now he expands that by pointing to one exception--

"Let no debt remain outstanding

except the continuing debt to love one another,"

Do you have any debts?

If you're a typical American, I'm sure you do.

I have to say, I hate debt.

Susan and I use a credit card for convenience,

but we try to buy only what we can pay for at the end of each month.

We have a civic responsibility to repay whatever debts we may incur,

but, Paul says, there is one debt we can never repay.

It is the one mortgage we will never be able to burn.¹

It is our perpetual debt of love.

We can never say that we have "loved enough."

We have a continuing debt to love one another--

but we are indebted only because God has already loved us.

"**We love**," John writes, "**because God first loved us**" (1 Jn. 4:19).

God's grace comes to us without conditions.

There is nothing in us that can ever merit God's grace.

We can never earn it.

God's grace comes to us without conditions—

but it does not come without obligation.

This debt of love is the on-going obligation—a debt we owe--

¹ So James Edwards.

that flows from a grateful heart for the gift of God's Son
who brings us into a new relationship with the God who is love.

In the gospel, we are recipients of an eternal love--

and that necessarily calls us to a life of love.

"**Freely you have received, freely give,**" Jesus said.

And, as we heard Jesus say to Simon the Pharisee two weeks ago,

those who have been forgiven much

are the ones who love much (Luke 7:41ff).

And God has called us to direct our gratitude for his love

first to those of the family of faith—to "**one another.**"

And there are a whole host of ways we are to love one another
given to us in the New Testament—

We are—

- "to serve **one another** in love." (Gal. 5:13)
- "to be devoted to **one another**"
- "to honor **one another** above ourselves." (Rom. 12:10)
- "to live in harmony with **one another.**" (Rom. 12:16; 1 Pet. 3:8)
- "to instruct **one another.**" (Rom. 15:14)
- "to teach and admonish **one another** with all wisdom," (Col. 3:16)
- "to speak to **one another** with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs." (Eph. 5:19)
- "to stop passing judgment on **one another.** (Rom. 14:13)
- "to accept **one another**, just as Christ accepted you" (Rom. 15:7)
- "to be kind and compassionate to **one another,**" (Eph. 4:32)

- "to clothe ourselves with humility toward **one another**" (1 Pet. 5:5)
- "to submit to **one another** out of reverence for Christ." (Eph. 5:21)
- "to bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have
against **one another**" (Col. 3:13; Eph. 4:2)
- "to encourage **one another** and build each other up" (1 Thess. 5:11)
- "to spur **one another** on toward love and good deeds." (Heb. 10:24)
- "to offer hospitality to **one another** without grumbling." (1 Pet. 4:9)
- "to greet **one another** with a holy kiss." (2 Cor. 13:12)
- "to love **one another** deeply, from the heart." (1 Pet. 1:22)

Paul says, "as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people,
especially to those who belong to the family of believers" (Gal. 6:10).

This is the "ministry"—the service—that we owe to one another in the church./

Paul says "especially," but certainly he did not mean "exclusively."

Our acts of love can't end within the church family--

we are also to love our neighbor.

But you may ask, "Who is my neighbor?"

We know that when Jesus was asked that question,

he told the story of that good Samaritan

who happened to meet a man in need along the road

as he traveled down to Jericho.

His neighbor was the needy person God had placed in his path.

He helped him simply in virtue of their common humanity.

"The neighbor in the New Testament sense is not someone arbitrarily chosen by us:
he is given to us by God."²

As G.K. Chesterton said,

"We make our friends, we make our enemies;
but God makes our next-door neighbor."

We are called by God to love our neighbor.

There is a specificity to this kind of love--

we are not to love humanity in general but no human being in particular.

Nor are we to love only through our tax money going to government programs,
and not with our own time and energy.

We are to love that person whom God brings across our path
who has a need that we can somehow meet.

Every day we must ask ourselves,

Who is that neighbor that God is calling me to love today?

And that debt of love toward other people

is nothing less than the debt that we owe to God himself--

for loving our neighbor as ourselves

is at the heart of God's demand upon us.

"for," Paul says, "whoever loves others has fulfilled the law."

v. 9--"The commandments, "Do not commit adultery," "Do not murder,"

"Do not steal," "Do not covet," and whatever other commandment there may be,
are summed up in this one rule: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

²So, Cranfield.

Love is that to which all the commands of the law point.

Paul is simply echoing the Lord Jesus here,
When asked, what is the greatest commandment,

Jesus said, **“Love the Lord your God
with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’**

This is the first and greatest commandment.

And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’

All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (Mt. 22:38-40).

All of these prohibitions that Paul lists here against harming people --

through adultery or murder or theft or coveting what belongs to them--
all those commands point to the supreme command to love.

Love is the fulfillment of the law--

love does naturally what the law seeks to legislate through specific commands.

Love creates the kinds of relationships
that the law seeks only to make possible.

That's why there will be no need for law in heaven.

You don't need law when there is love.

Love is the fulfillment of the law--

but does that mean we don't need law anymore?

Is Paul saying here that we can throw away all the rules God gives us to live by,

and hold on to just this one instead—

“Love your neighbor as yourself”?

Some say that--

Didn't John Lennon and Paul McCartney sing,

"All you need is love"

Some suggest that love has its own "built-in moral compass"

which discerns by intuition what the "loving" thing to do is in each situation.

But that naïvely ignores the fallenness of humanity in this world.

Love, as it is experienced in this world, is not infallible--

so in this world, law and love need each other.

In the words of one commentator:

"The law protects love from the subjectivism and self-deception

to which the Christian is constantly exposed,

not because he is 'unjust,' but [simply] because he is

human."³

Or as another put it, "love needs law for its direction,

while law needs love for its inspiration."⁴

You could say that every divine commandment

is simply a way that love is to be protected and is to be expressed.

Tom Wright contends that rules serve as signposts and warning signs,

or even crash-barriers, on the highway.

They are important to keep us on track if something goes wrong

but unnecessary for those who have learned to drive properly.⁵

Paul as a pastor uses rules in his epistles to help his readers avoid a crash,

³Deidun, cited in Moo.

⁴ John Stott

⁵ *After You Believe*, p. 199.

and they may also help us in uncharted territory,
but Paul's greater concern is with the development of the virtues
which inherently lead us down the right road.

For all the virtues

that we who are joined to Christ in faith are to “put on”—
compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience—
they are all expressions of love.

Even we as Christians, who are no longer under the law of Moses,
are still subject to the law of Christ⁶--
a law which helps to give substance to this law of love.

Jesus' Great Commission to make disciples of all nations
includes teaching them to obey all that Jesus commanded us.
“If you love me, you will keep my commands,” he said (Jn 14:15 ESV).

Love and obedience go hand in hand—
love is the fulfillment of the law.

The law is summed up in this one command:
"Love your neighbor as yourself."

This means that **to love is our supreme activity.**

The poet Robert Browning once wrote,

⁶ Cf. 1 Cor. 9:21.

"Take away love and our earth is a tomb."

That's true, for if you take away love,

you take away the presence of the very life of God.

Love is supreme, Paul says in that great love chapter—1 Cor 13.

Without it, everything we do,

everything that we think is worthy of praise,

will be nothing but a big zero in the sight of God.

Love is supreme,

for our God is love.

So here is the supreme challenge of the Christian,

and of the church:

to grow in our love.

and I would say, To grow in our love by grasping the gospel.

1 Jn 4:10,11—"This is love:

not that we loved God,

but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another."

Love is from God—

and it is his greatest gift to us.

Nothing else even comes close.

And love comes to us through the gospel of Jesus Christ—

Love is the source of the gospel—

as it flows out of the very heart of God,
who sent his Son to redeem us.

Love is the substance of the gospel—

as it is demonstrated in the Son of God
who gave up his life for us on a cross.

Love is the power of the gospel—

it melts hard hearts,
and sets us free from a slavery to self-centeredness,
as God sends his Spirit—his Spirit of love—into our very souls.

And love is the goal of the gospel—

that we may share in the life of God himself—
that Trinitarian life of eternal love,
and share the image of Jesus Christ.

What a beautiful thing love is.

Now more than ever it is central to our mission to the world.

People need to see the difference the gospel makes in the lives of Christians—

**“By this everyone will now that you are my disciples,
if you love one another,”** Jesus said (Jn 13:35).

People don't care what you believe until they first believe that you care.

It is our love for one another, and for our neighbors,
that will make the gospel attractive to the world.

And there is nothing more gratifying to me as a pastor

than to see you in this church living together with love for one another.
There is no clearer demonstration of the truth of the gospel
and the power of the Spirit at work among us.

I urge you to set your eyes on the beauty of love. ///

Let me turn back to Romans 13—

“Love your neighbor as yourself,” Paul says,
for **“love is the fulfillment of the law.”**

Then in v. 11, he writes--**“Do this, understanding the present time.**

**The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber,
because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.**

The night is nearly over; the day is almost here.”

Paul had opened this section of moral exhortation in his letter back in 12:1

with the words, **“Therefore, in view of God's mercy . . .”**

We are to live in response to what God in his love for us has already done.

We are to look back in time to the cross of Christ to see God's love,

and we are to look back in time to the empty tomb to see his power.

The transforming grace of the Christian gospel

flows from that work of Christ already accomplished in the past.

But at this point, Paul changes directions--

instead of finding our inspiration from the past,

he calls us to look to the future.

We are to understand the moment in which we live—

It's time to wake up from your slumber.

The night is nearly over--

In the resurrection of Jesus,

the first rays of the dawning sun are just over the horizon.

Do not conform to the pattern of this world--

for this world is not going to be with us much longer.

A far greater world, a more wonderful world,

a glorious heavenly world,

a world of love will soon be upon us.

And when that world comes, our salvation will be complete--

we will become like Christ himself in all his glory--

we will finally be rid of all the last remnants of sin,

we will reign in life and in love.

"Our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.

The night is nearly over; the day is almost here."

We must understand the time in which we live.

But Paul, it's been over nineteen hundred years since you wrote these words!

Can we believe that you weren't wrong when you said,

"The day is almost here"?

I think we have to appreciate the way in which Paul understood time--

the first Christians were convinced that in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus
the last days had been ushered in--

Jesus had inaugurated the End-time.

Nothing more important in all of human history had happened or would happen
until God brought human history to its conclusion in the glorious return of Christ.

The length of that period of time between his first and second comings

depended entirely upon God's gracious patience,

for the end was always pressing down, ready to be revealed.

The event is certain,

though the timing is uncertain,

which should all the more stimulate our hope and arouse our wakefulness.⁷

We know it's coming--

we ought not to be caught off guard. /

Now, I confess, with the passing of nineteen hundred years

it can become easier to let the imminence of that event

escape from our imaginations.

It is easier to think of history just going on and on

for hundreds of years.

But even if the coming of Christ does not grip us,

surely our own deaths ought to.

For each one of us,

⁷So Alford, quoted in Moo.

this world will pass away to us at the moment when we take our last breath.

And I can assure you, that day is drawing nearer to all of us every day.

The war in Ukraine will no longer concern us;

the protracted fight between the Republicans and the Democrats

will no longer hold our interest;

nor will the cash balance in our bank accounts.

We will awaken to a new day in glorious light,

and suddenly everything will be different.

That's part of understanding the time--

living life with the end in view.

In one way or another, "**The night is almost over;**

the day is almost here."

Do you understand the time?

Will you live your life now in the light of that glorious end?

Paul says, "**Wake up!**"

Don't be lulled to sleep.

Don't live in a dull stupor, with your face fixed on your phone all the time.

The day is dawning--

and in the Middle East at the time when Paul was writing,

in an age governed by the sun and not by the convenience of artificial light,

only the lazy would stay in bed after the dawn--
especially since the work had to get done before the heat of the noonday sun.
And that sun is just about to come up--
it's time to wake up!

There is no time for the sleep of spiritual laziness and indifference.

That future day is bearing down upon us.

It almost time for you to enter into heaven, that world of love.

So be now what you will become then, Paul says.

Let your future destiny determine your present desires.

v.12--"So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light.

Let us behave decently, as in the daytime,
not in orgies and drunkenness,
not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy."

We belong to the daytime--

our true home is in that world of light
where the holy love of God shines bright.
So let's live that way.

Just think of the things that people in this world are engaged in--

drunken orgies,
sexual escapades of all sorts--
do you expect to find those in that world to come?

And what about the petty disputes that so often surface, even in the church--
the dissension and the jealousy--
the little ways that we offend one another and get offended by one another;
the ways we take sides and split up and fight and bicker and argue--
is any of that going to be a part of that glorious new world, that world of love?
Of course not.

So put off all of that--

that's not who you are--

that's not what you will become--

all *that* belongs to this world,

and you no longer belong to this world. /

v.14--"Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ,

and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature."

Clothe yourself with the Lord Jesus Christ--

That's been called the summary

of all of Paul's exhortations on the Christian life.

This is what it is all about--

To put on Christ.

You were once merely a child of Adam--

your identity was solely determined

by identification with the fallenness of this world--

you were under the condemnation of God.

But now, by faith, you have been joined to Christ--

you have become a child of God,
you are now identified with the new era of righteousness and life
found in your relationship with Christ.

As Paul says to the Galatian Christians--

**"for all of you who were baptized into Christ
have clothed yourselves with Christ."** (Gal. 3:27)

This is who you are--

identified with Christ, joined with Christ, in union with Christ.

By faith, you have been clothed with the righteousness of Christ.

When God looks at you, he sees the spotless garments of Jesus Christ.

We are to live out what is already true of us

and to experience now what we will one day become.

We are to live out our life in Christ.

We are to consciously embrace Christ

in such a way that his character is manifested in all we do and say.

We are to **"put on Christ."**

Admittedly, it is an odd sort of expression,

though it didn't originate with the Apostle.

In one Greek writer before the time of Paul

we read of a reference to one actor "putting on" a character.

In other words, he "played the part" of that character in the play.

So, we are to "play the part" of Christ in our various roles in this life,
with the Scriptures providing our script.

But what Paul says go much deeper than that--
for we have the Holy Spirit of God living within us.

We are not just "play-acting"--
remember, our love must be sincere, without hypocrisy (12:9).

We do not merely "play the part" of Christ--
we are actually transformed from the inside
so that his character becomes ours--
we are actually being conformed to his image.
He lives within us, Paul says, and expresses his own life through us.⁸

We are no longer in Adam; we are in Christ.
Our identity is no longer determined by our old union with Adam
in that old kingdom of sin and death;
We belong to the that new union--that union with Christ;
we belong to that new kingdom of righteousness and life.
We belong to that new kingdom that is to come—that world of love.

So it doesn't make sense for us to live according to
that old realm of existence that will soon be passing away.

"do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature."

Make no provision for that old way of life--
don't dwell on it,

⁸Cf. Gal. 2:20. On this dramatic imagery, see Kevin Vanhoozer.

don't plan for it;

don't dream about it;

don't dwell it--

it will soon be over.

Rather, clothe yourself with the Lord Jesus Christ.

So how do we do this?

It is a matter of the mind, and of the heart, and of the will.

First, Paul says, "Be transformed by the renewing of your minds."

If we are to clothe ourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ,

we must saturate our minds with his truth.

"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly," Paul says (Col. 3:16)..

We must attend to **the truth about him--**

that he is the Lord,

the Son of God and the Son of Man,

the second Adam, the head of a new humanity.

We must attend to **the truth which he taught--**

the truth about the character of God our Father in heaven,

the truth about the world we live in,

the truth about ourselves.

We must saturate our minds with the virtues and values

of the kingdom which he brings--
that the greatest shall be the servant of all;
that the meek shall inherit the earth;
that those who give shall receive;
and that those who lose themselves for his sake
will find themselves.

We must first apply our **minds** to his truth.

Are you doing that?

Are you finding ways to attend his truth?

You must, if you are to grow in love.

Second, if we are to clothe ourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ

**we must feed our hearts with the beauty and the goodness and the joy
of becoming like him.**

When you indulge yourself in sinful pleasures,

when you engage in petty squabbling,

when you nurture old grudges and hold on to past offenses,

are you proud of what you are doing?

Do you feel good about it?

Is it something you would want other people to know about?

Or aren't you ashamed--for these are the deeds of darkness--

deeds that you would rather keep secret.

These deeds don't foster love--they prevent it.

These things don't bring joy--they only produce guilt and sorrow. /

Now contrast that with becoming like Christ--

living in a joyful gratitude to God for the good things he gives us each day;

enjoying the reconciliation in relationships

that comes in humble forgiveness and grace;

experiencing the peace of God

even in the most stormy of circumstances.

There is a beauty, a goodness, a joy in this kind of life,

that can be found nowhere else.

Let your heart be drawn to it--

desire it deeply, let it be a treasured prize worth working for.

And finally, if you would clothe yourself with Christ

you must not only saturate you mind with his truth

and feed your heart with his beauty and goodness and joy,

you must also set your will to do it,

by God's grace and power.

Don't be deceived--

desiring to be clothed with Christ is not the same thing as actually doing it.

We can understand with our minds what it means;

we can appreciate with our hearts that it would be a good thing;

but if we do not set our wills to pursue it

we will be in exactly the same position we were when we started.

We must be willing to pray, "Yes, Lord, I want to become like Christ--

By the power of your Spirit, change me!"

It involves an act of will--

the will to act.

Are you willing to pray daily--

"Lord, how do you want me to respond to my wife or husband,

for my brother or my sister,

or my neighbor or my co-worker today?"

"Lord, who do you want me to forgive today?

"Lord, who would you have me show kindness to today?

"Lord, who do you want me to go out of my way to help today?"

Are you willing to ask God to show you a particular area of your character

that he wants to change.

Maybe it's pride--

or maybe it's envy--

or maybe it's lust.

Each one of these may require a specific act of the will

to exercise a direct assault on its tyranny over you.

If it's pride,

God may call you to humble yourself in some specific way--

go admit to someone that you were wrong,
go clean a bathroom somewhere.

If it's envy--

go compliment someone on something about them you admire.

If it's lust--

put a screening device on your computer,
trash those trashy advertisements,
or quit watching those sexually explicit movies.

Commit yourself to engaging with others in the body of Christ
who can encourage you in this pursuit of godliness.

What's it going to be for you?

**"clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ,
and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature."**

For we have been joined to Christ--
we have a home with him in heaven--
and that heavenly world, that world of love--
it's on its way--it's just around the corner--

Do you hope to live there?

Do you hope to enjoy its beauties
and to experience the wonders of its glory?

Then be what you will become--

prepare yourself to live in that world even now--

experience a taste of that world to come in this present world

as you experience the life of the risen Christ.

For Jesus Christ is the supreme citizen of that glorious world to come.

For he is the ultimate expression and the absolute embodiment of love.

So put on Christ--

"And do this, understanding the present time.

The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber,

because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.

The night is nearly over; the day is almost here.

So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light."

That light that comes to us in Jesus Christ.

This is where true love is to be found.

May we all set our minds and hearts on this most supreme reality—

the reality of love—

that most excellent way.

That's our challenge—the challenge to love.

I close with the words of Jonathan Edwards:

"If your heart is full of love, it will find vent;

you will find or make ways enough to express your love in deeds.

When a fountain abounds in water, it will send forth streams.

Consider that as a principle of love is the main principle in the heart of a real Christian,
so the labor of love is the main business of the Christian life."⁹

Prayer

Closing Song: *Let It Be Said of Us*

Benediction:

Phil. 1:9-11 [May] your love may abound more and more
in knowledge and depth of insight,
so that you may be able to discern what is best
and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ,
filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ --
to the glory and praise of God

⁹ *Charity*, p. 148.

Great Themes of Discipleship, #4

"Living a Life of Love and Obedience"

Rom. 13:8-14

In his letter to the Romans, Paul concludes his exhortation to "be transformed by the renewing of your minds" begun in 12:1,2 with a further encouragement to love, and in 13:8-14. He sets that command within a broader context: the dawning of a new day. We'll consider this great theme of living in love, and obedience, which will prepare us for that glorious world of love to come.

I. To love is our obligation—

Our debt of love (13:8)

II. To love is to fulfill the law,

for to love is our supreme activity (13:9-10)

III. To love is to understand the present time (13:11)—

the day of heavenly glory is at hand.

Let your future destiny determine your present desires (13:12-14)

*“clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ,
and do not think about how to gratify
the desires of the flesh”—Rom. 13:14*

Sermon Response—

"Living a Life of Love and Obedience"

Rom. 13:8-14

- How do law and love go together? How does love “fulfill” the law?
- Why is living a life of love so important? What hinders you in living a life of love?
- How can we grow in love? How does our grasp of the gospel relate to our life of love?
- In what area are you “slumbering” in your Christian life? Where do you need to “wake up”?
- Read Rom. 13:10. Is love more than just not hurting other people? What is wrong with this cultural definition of goodness? What difference does this make?