

Romans 13:8-14: Owe Nothing But Love

Sermon for MBCCC by Dr. Katelyn Brackney

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⁸ Owe no one anything, except to love one another, 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.” ¹⁰ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

¹¹ Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is already the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; ¹² the night is far gone; the day is near. Let us then throw off^[a] the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; ¹³ let us walk decently as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in illicit sex and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. ¹⁴ Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires. (NRSVUE)

We’re switching gears out of Matthew for a moment, but only partially. Today’s text from Romans and the one we read earlier from Matthew go hand in hand. Here in Romans, Paul is writing to a community in Rome who needs some reminders of their call, and not just call but obligation, to love one another. He begins here by listing a few of the commandments: don’t murder, don’t steal, don’t be envious of others, don’t commit adultery....the list is meant to be representative of all the commandments, but he then sums it up saying, “...you shall love your neighbor as yourself. Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.” So the actions we live out should reflect the love we have for others, not out of what they can offer us, or what we take from them, but out of their very being; as we, ideally and hopefully, love ourselves. This is what it means to fulfill the law.

This kind of love is something we only can achieve in community with God and others. So here, Paul is referencing the second part of this well known

law, which starts with, or stems from, the Shema (as it is called in the Old Testament or Torah), which says “Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength,” and later Jesus shares the same command along with the second, which says to love neighbor as your love yourself. So here, Paul is repeating this two-part command that sums up all other commandments or laws. And while he doesn’t mention the first part, it is made clear in the previous chapters in Romans that humans should honor God, so the first part of honoring God would have been inherent to the community Paul was sharing with. The love of God, neighbor, and self are intrinsically connected.

So in sharing the examples from the Ten Commandments and summarizing them with this statement of loving others, Paul is stating that love cannot do wrong to another. But unfortunately, the reality is that we are humans who are not perfect and make mistakes, right? So even when we do love, and seek to love others well, we don’t always do a good job. I’m sure we can each think of experiences in our own lives and in the life of the various communities we are a part of (including this one) where, despite having great love for others, there is still hurt of some kind that happens. And this is where I want to suggest that Matthew 18 comes into play.

Now, let me start by stating that sometimes I think we can get things wrong or that things can get messy when we skip around between different texts that are doing different things. And. Sometimes, the lectionary, or other sources, intentionally pair Biblical texts that may have something valuable to share when we look at them together. So, I want to acknowledge that Romans and Matthew are addressing different audiences, and different circumstances, but I think they still work well together, so we’re going to take a look and see what we can learn when they’re in conversation with each other today.

So here we have Romans, which is sharing the importance and necessity of loving others as we love ourselves, and that in doing so, when really lived out, it is a fulfillment of the law (which starts with love of God, and that then shapes how we interact with others). But the reality is we don't always get it right, so now we turn to Matthew: Matthew 18:15-20 says,

¹⁵ “If your brother or sister sins against you,^[a] go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If you are listened to, you have regained that one. ¹⁶ But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. ¹⁷ If that person refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church, and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a gentile and a tax collector. ¹⁸ Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹ Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. ²⁰ For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

I will be the first to admit that I greatly dislike conflict. I remember as a kid my mom would reference this passage when it came to navigating conflict with others, particularly at first, my sisters, and then more as I got older and my circle grew. Obviously here, Matthew is talking about conflict within the church specifically, but I think there are things to be learned for how we handle conflict in general, too. But either way, we do not stop being the church when we walk out these doors each Sunday, so I think it's meaningful that we hold in mind how we navigate these difficult moments, wherever we are.

So, Paul says first to speak with the person you're in conflict with, and if that doesn't go well, bring in some folks to help mediate, and if that doesn't go well, bring it before the church, and then if that doesn't go well and causes further disruption to the community, it may be best for that person to become “as a

gentile and a tax collector,” which essentially means someone you don’t associate with.

Now, I want to also be clear that this text, as it goes on, shares themes that are a way of saying that the person may not be disaffiliated forever. There is still room for reconciliation and reclamation of community. But sometimes we need space. And this whole process, however it ends, is hard and hard work! But I think it’s important work because it is a part of loving neighbor and loving yourself, because remember “love does no wrong to a neighbor.” And if that’s what we’re aiming for, we must do the hard work of reconciliation as a part of living out the love of God, neighbor, and self.

One commentary I read said, “Jesus lived a life of “higher righteousness” based upon the principle of love and calls his followers to do the same. It behooves the church to hold itself accountable to this calling and put some energy into closing the distance between the gospel we preach and the lives we live.” (Belief Matthew Commentary, p.224)

Whew. That last part hits me every time I read it: “...put some energy into closing the distance between the gospel we preach and the lives we live.”

I can stand up here all day and talk about what it looks like to love others, but if I, if we, don’t actually put in the work to love others well, to match our words to our actual lived lives...it’s just that, words. Later in that same commentary it says “correction can be a gracious act that seeks the restoration of the brother or sister and the integrity of the community...this happens where people love one another. And the new community is to be a place where the love of God is taught and lived.” (Matthew Commentary, p.225)

When Paul says in Romans that love cannot do wrong to another, it is not an avoidance of conflict or harm, it is intentional restoration of relationships as an

act of love. Love isn't just an emotion or absence of harm, it is a call and embodiment of active care toward those around us (Belief Romans Commentary, p.226). And that is what I want us to hold onto today.

I do want to take a quick moment to acknowledge that there are some relationships that are best discontinued, and sometimes repair is beyond the work we can do in this life. But what Matthew shows us, and what Romans invites us into, is a way of life that seeks love of God, self, and others – in conflict, in joy, and with grace – as we seek to embody and be reflections of our God who is Love itself. We belong to one another, even when we don't want to. That is both the gift and the difficulty of life in community as the church and with our neighbors. Sometimes loving well comes easily, and sometimes it feels impossible. But what we must remember is that we all belong to God and one another, and because of this, we do our best to love well.

And when we don't get it right, or when we need space, we remember that whether in this life or in the life to come, Love will mend what has been broken. And until then, we keep putting energy into closing the distance between the gospel we preach (or hear) and the lives we live.” And there's a whole lot of grace inbetween. Thanks be to God.

Amen.