

***Romans 13, Pt. 2***

The thirteenth chapter of Romans is all about love, though 1 Corinthians 13 is still the one that everyone reads at weddings. The heart of the chapter is found in v. 10: “Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.” To love our neighbors, we must be people who pay our taxes and fulfill our civic responsibilities. We talked about this last week. As I concluded then, this doesn’t mean that we mindlessly follow, refuse to critique, or obey men before God. Obviously, Christians must live differently in this world, listen to God’s Word first, and challenge the powers when they are wrong. Paul’s point is that Christians are supposed to be people who go with the grain of creation; and authority and the sword (as Paul calls it) are part of God’s design. But we also must make the horizontal movement towards the neighbors around us. The word neighbor is a terrifically concrete word. It admits no room for abstraction or ideology. Your neighbors are simply the people around you. And you are called to love them. Or to say it as Paul does in this passage, you are called to not harm your neighbor or to do no wrong to them.

Who do you think of when you think of a good neighbor? Someone you knew growing up, or someone you know now, or maybe Fred and Ethel from *I Love Lucy*? I suppose that I think of the Hensleys. The Hensleys were not only neighbors but landlords. They were available, present, watchful, but never intrusive or controlling. They gave both support and space. They might bring over vegetables and sit for a while. They might simply wave hello as you drove by. Good neighbors will keep an eye on our houses when we are away, hold spare copies of keys for when we lock ourselves out, and share baked goods or casseroles during a hard time. They might offer us conversation when we are all out and about. But they also know how to grant privacy. They protect boundaries even as they extend care. They aren’t interested in collecting information about you to spread around to others. And you look out for them, too. If you know that the guy’s back isn’t so great these days, then you might go and pick up the extra sticks in the yard to spare him the pain.

The greatest example of the neighbor in the Bible is the good Samaritan. The good Samaritan found a man beat up and abused. He took care of his needs. He set him on a path to health and recovery. But he didn't hang around. He didn't stick his nose in the victim's business. He didn't turn another human being into a project to be managed and manipulated. He helped. He cared. He gave mercy when mercy was needed. He was a good neighbor.

How do we not harm others? Paul is a good Jewish guy, so he knows where to go - **the Ten Commandments**. Paul is also a follower of Jesus, so he knows where to go - **the power available to us in and through Christ**. And so those are the features of the text which we should wrestle with as we strive to be righteous neighbors in an unrighteous world.

**The Ten Commandments.** In 13:9, Paul explicitly mentions four of the commandments: "Do not murder. Do not commit adultery. Do not steal. Do not covet." He also refers to "any other commandment." Indeed, any of the Ten Commandments, including the first four, have implications for how we treat neighbors. For example, idolatry - explicitly forbidden in the first commandment - often leads to practices which dehumanize people. There is a clear logic here. If we lose sight of who God is, then we lose sight of who people are. And when we lose sight of who people are, then we begin to treat people in ways inconsistent with their creation and dignity. The Old Testament teaches us that the old Canaanite religions were full of several reprehensible practices which were rooted in idolatry. The Ten Commandments are an indispensable guide to treating others well. Loving neighbors is achieved by telling the truth in legal settings, honoring parents, and taking time for worship and rest. When we refrain from things such as murder and adultery, we do no harm to our neighbors and thereby love them.

It is crucial here to remember something from our Reformed tradition. The Commandments are meant to be developed. The best way to not do something is to positively do something else. Doing the bare minimum - let's say, not actually killing someone - is not the same as loving that person well. So, in the Westminster Larger Catechism, we find that the sixth commandment requires us to do things like defend others from violence, seek reconciliation instead of revenge, and be careful with our own health (and presumably the health of others if we are called to contribute to it). Why? If we have the power to stop

a neighbor from being violently assaulted and actively decline to intervene, we have contributed to their harm through neglect. If we don't want to forgive other people and instead seek revenge, then we begin to cultivate the feelings of anger and resentment that produce physical harm when given full vent. If we don't watch what we eat or how we treat our bodies, then we are contributing to our own harm. If we have the power and the knowledge to offer health to someone else and we decline to do so, then we are doing harm to that person. The Catechism applies this kind of reason to each of the commandments, thereby creating a substantial Christian ethic. Say what you want about the Puritans, but they knew how to use Scripture and reason to pursue a life of holiness and love towards others.

What does all this mean in practice? If you know your neighbor has a heart problem, take it easy on the butter when you bring them a dish. If your kids like to toss a ball around in the backyard and damage is done to your neighbor's property, make restitution for the damage. If your neighbor's wife comes to you and gripes about her husband, give a listening ear but also try and support the marriage by reminding her of her husband's good qualities. Don't foster discontent and anger in other people's marriages, so that they can live stronger lives of faithfulness to one another. Indeed, through all these actions and so many more, love fulfils the law of God.

**The Power of Christ.** Paul doesn't stop with the Ten Commandments, and he doesn't assume that any of us are going to do a particularly good job of neighbor-love on our own. In fact, if most of the letter to the Romans is to be believed, then we will stand before God in judgment precisely because of our failure to love neighbors (chapter two). If we hope in our own good works on that last day, then we place our hope in the wrong thing. Instead, Christ has died as an atoning sacrifice (chapter three). We are then called to have faith in Christ (chapter four) And Christ who died for us has not left us alone. We have been united to him in death and resurrection (chapter six) because we are indwelt by the Holy Spirit (chapter eight). We are born again not because of our own strength or will but because of the mercy of God, a mercy which God gives without consideration to our merits or entitlements (chapter nine).

Paul tells us in the closing verses of the chapter that salvation is coming closer with every moment. In v. 11, Paul is referring to the final judgment and the

salvation that the Christian will experience from that judgment. The temptations to indulge in deeds of darkness are all around, but Christians are instead called to live in the light. And what is the key to this kind of life? It is all about what we “put on.” In v. 12, we are told to put on the armor of light. What is this armor of light? The answer comes in v. 14 - we must put on the Lord Jesus Christ. This is a curious expression. If we trust in Jesus, then the righteousness of Christ has already been reckoned to our account. Moreover, the Holy Spirit lives inside of us. And yet Paul holds out that there is a step that we must take as we seek to live in this world. That step is clothing ourselves with Jesus. In other words, our hope for transformation can only be found in Jesus. We must listen to his words. We must trust in his work. We must pray in his name. We must follow him in obedience. When we experience success, we must give him thanks and praise. When we fail, we must turn to him for mercy. You can’t love your neighbors well on your own. But Jesus can love them through you as you live by faith in him.

“Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.” We are called to be a part of God’s righteous community and live out that righteousness before the watching world. As we close today, I would like to consider a final word of exhortation. We are all aware that there are many challenging issues in politics and culture. There are many different voices and many different views. Christians don’t need to have simplistic views on policy and cultural issues. We can disagree with each other. We can have conversations and debates. But we, nonetheless, should be agreed on a basic point. Whatever the merits of your policy preferences, the person in proximity to you at the moment is the person that you should strive to care for and love. For example, take your stand on immigration. Defend it. Support it. I know plenty of Christians who are more conservative on this issue and some who are more liberal. But remember that if God puts someone in your path directly, your neighbor-love cannot be based on their citizenship status. Do your best to love that person. Or take another example. God has a design for marriage. One man and one woman for life. As biblical Christians, we must support and defend this view, refusing to compromise our convictions. But faithfulness also means caring for the neighbor whom God puts in your path who is living contrary to God’s design. We still must proceed with kindness and charity. Truth and love are never at odds with one another, for God is both true and loving.

Some neighbors are downright difficult to love. Some neighbors may even be dangerous, necessitating that we love them from a distance. But God doesn't make mistakes. He has placed you where he has placed you. The people you must strive to care for are the people in your path. The word neighbor is a terrifically concrete word. Maybe you can even start today by loving one of these other pilgrims in the pews who are sitting all around you.