

November 12 Lesson 11 (NIV)

Freedom to Love

Devotional Reading: Matthew 22:34–40

Background Scripture: Romans 13:8–10; 1 Corinthians 13:8–13

Romans 13:8–10

⁸ Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others 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 whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” ¹⁰ Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.

1 Corinthians 13:8–13

⁸ Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. ⁹ For we know in part and we prophesy in part, ¹⁰ but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. ¹¹ When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. ¹² For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

¹³ And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

Key Text

The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery,” “You shall not murder,” “You shall not steal,” “You shall not covet,” and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”—Romans 13:9

God’s Law Is Love

Unit 3: Christ Frees, Law Enslaves

Lessons 10–13

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How to Say It

BethsaidaBeth-say-uh-duh.

CorinthiansKo-rin-thee-unz (*th* as in *thin*).

DecalogueDek-uh-log.

DeuteronomyDue-ter-ahn-uh-me.

LeviticusLeh-vit-ih-kus.

SamaritanSuh-mare-uh-tun.

ThessaloniansThess-uh-lo-nee-unz (*th* as in *thin*).

Introduction

A. Life Under Law and Love

A woman married a man who eventually was almost impossible to live with. He became very demanding, insisting that his meals be served at exactly the same time every day and prepared according to his specifications. He wanted every piece of his clothing to be ironed, every room in the house to be kept spotlessly clean, and all other requirements to be followed to the letter. If

any of his high standards were not met, he stormed off in a rage, yelling at his wife at the top of his lungs. He made life miserable for her.

After about three years, the husband passed away unexpectedly. Eventually, the widow married a caring Christian man, who was the complete opposite of her first husband. She was so happy that she wanted to do all she could to show her gratitude for what she had never experienced with her first husband.

One day, it dawned on her that she was doing the very same things for her second husband that she had done for the first: fixing his meals the way he liked them, ironing his clothes, etc.—things that had at one time been demanded of her. Only this time, with her second husband, she was doing them out of love, not because someone was “laying down the law.”

A person who lives primarily by law and a person who lives primarily by love both live obedient lives. But one of those approaches is much more satisfying—the subject of today’s lesson.

B. Lesson Context: Romans

Thus far in the quarter, we have studied two lessons from Romans (lessons 5 and 6). Those lessons come from a section of the book that is more doctrinal (what we are to believe) in nature. Today’s lesson moves us to a section that is more practical (what we are to do) in content as Paul shifts focus. Chapter 12 begins this section by challenging readers to offer themselves as “a living sacrifice” (Romans 12:1). What follows describes what that kind of life should look like in a Christian’s daily conduct.

In the seven verses in Romans 13 that precede our first segment of text for this lesson, Paul examined a topic that should be of special interest to Christians of any century: our attitude toward civic authorities. The key concept here is one of obligation, which Paul uses to make a transition from how we are to relate to those authorities to how we are to relate to one another.

C. Lesson Context: 1 Corinthians

First Corinthians 13, the second of two segments of today’s lesson, features Paul’s timeless and matchless explanation of Christian love. The larger context of this chapter is Paul’s discussion of spiritual gifts in chapters 12–14. Possession and use of spiritual gifts had become a source of great contention within the Corinthian church. Paul was concerned that undue focus on these gifts could distract the Corinthian believers from more crucial concerns. Should that happen, the result would be a fracturing of the unity in Christ that is to characterize followers of Jesus.

I. Love and the Law (Romans 13:8–10)

A. The Debt We Owe (v. 8)

8a. Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another,

The Greek verb translated here as the noun *debt* is a reflection of the same word in its noun form in Romans 13:7 (not in today’s lesson), there translated “owe.” This continues the thought

of *obligation* across these two verses (see also the Lesson Context). What's different now is that the object of the obligation has changed from being that of what we owe to civic authorities to what we owe to *one another*.

The first part of this half verse is certainly an approval of honoring one's commitments, be they in terms of money, property, etc. Some may question whether Paul is prohibiting the taking out of loans or mortgages. But approval or disapproval of monetary indebtedness is not the main point here. Rather, the phrasing sets up a contrast with the second part of this half verse regarding what should never be considered paid off: the obligation *to love*. Love among fellow believers is to be a primary characteristic of Christians (John 13:34–35; 1 John 3:14).

8b. for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law.

What Paul states here he stresses in even stronger terms in Galatians 5:14: "the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' "

B. The Imperatives to Obey (vv. 9–10)

9. The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery," "You shall not murder," "You shall not steal," "You shall not covet," and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

The Ten Commandments (Decalogue) are found in Exodus 20:1–17 and Deuteronomy 5:6–21. Paul's citations from those indicate that what he has said about fulfilling "the law" in the previous verse refers to the Law of Moses rather than civic law.

We note that the positive command to *love your neighbor as yourself* is framed in terms of several *you shall not* negative commands (compare Matthew 19:18). This implies that a foundation of neighbor-love is a commitment to do no harm. But Christian love is not simply refusing to hurt someone else; it is also active as it works for the good of others, as included in the statement *whatever other command there may be*.

As we commit ourselves to such love, we will define neighbor-love as Jesus did in Luke 10:25–37: meeting the needs of those we encounter. Such love fulfills what Jesus called the second of the two greatest commandments, on which "all the Law and the Prophets hang" (Matthew 22:39–40; compare Leviticus 19:18). This is "the royal law found in Scripture" (James 2:8).

10. Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.

Paul repeats what he has said previously. Therefore this verse serves as a kind of bookend to wrap up his line of thought before he makes a transition to another topic.

Even so, we can add the observation that Jesus himself came to fulfill the law (Matthew 5:17). He did so in his love for sinful humanity by taking on the Old Testament roles of prophet, priest, and king as he established the new covenant (Mark 6:4; John 12:15; Hebrews 7:11–8:13). He fulfilled the law by keeping it perfectly—he "had no sin" (2 Corinthians 5:21). That qualified him as the Son of God to be the perfect sacrifice that could take away and forgive the sins of humanity (1 Peter 1:18–19). There is no greater example of neighbor-love!

II. Love and Spiritual Gifts

(1 Corinthians 13:8–13)

A. That Which Is Temporary (v. 8)

8. Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away.

Love is to be given priority in practice because it possesses much greater “staying power” than spiritual giftedness. Love *never fails* in the sense of expiring or becoming unnecessary. This is the only place in Paul’s letters where he uses the adverb translated here as “never,” stressing the supremacy of love. By contrast, the time will come when the three gifts mentioned—*prophecies, tongues, and knowledge*—are no longer in use.

Paul has already mentioned those three gifts, among others, in this section of his letter (see 1 Corinthians 12:7–11). Perhaps disagreements regarding these three had been creating the greatest amount of tension within the Corinthian church. These gifts were rather “public” in nature, and thus those who possessed them tended to draw more attention to themselves (whether that was their motivation or not). Yet, as impressive as these gifts were, their impact was significantly lessened if the person exercising them did not do so out of love (compare 13:1–3).

B. That Which Is Incomplete (vv. 9–10)

9–10. For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears.

These two verses begin a deeper dive in examining why spiritual gifts are of lesser value than the imperative to love. The relative valuations are seen in the contrast between the phrases *in part* (thrice) and *completeness*. There is no widespread agreement regarding what Paul is referring to by the latter phrase. One proposal is to see the contrast in terms of things that are temporary versus “perfect” (another possible translation of *completeness*) things that are enduring, as the passage of time eventually reveals. This leads to the viewpoint that Paul is referring to life in the world to come after Jesus returns. What could be more perfect than that? At Jesus’ second coming, the temporary things God provides for our spiritual growth now will no longer be necessary.

Another proposal is to see the contrast in terms of things that are incomplete in their contents versus things that are complete in that regard. Given the partial nature of the things that individuals may *know* and *prophesy* (see 1 Corinthians 8:1–3; 1 Peter 1:10–12), the proposed interpretation is that the term *what is in part* refers to the completion of the New Testament. In other words, the proposal is that certain spiritual gifts were no longer necessary after the first century AD after the exercise of those gifts had authenticated the new and perfect revelation of God’s will within the new covenant.

The word translated *completeness* here also can mean “mature.” That idea is present in 1 Corinthians 14:20, where the same Greek word is used to contrast the immaturity of children with the maturity of adults. The idea of maturity is also present in the next two verses of today’s lesson.

C. That Which Is Expected (vv. 11–12)

11. When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me.

Clearly, there is a sense in which we are to remain childlike in our dependence on and trust in the Lord (Matthew 18:1–4). But remaining childish in terms of spiritual maturity is condemned (1 Corinthians 3:2; Hebrews 5:12–13). In the verse at hand, however, Paul is using the physical maturing process, when the interests and priorities of childhood fall away as we grow older, as his illustration. We take on new responsibilities and interests and put aside the childish things that once consumed much of our time and attention.

In the context of the discussion of love and spiritual gifts, the specifics represented by this child/adult contrast will vary according to one's view of the "completeness" in the previous verse. If it is understood in an absolute sense of perfection, then what occurs at the return of Christ is the issue (compare 1 Corinthians 15:51–52; Philippians 3:21). If "maturity" is more in view, then that is something that can happen in this present age as spiritual maturity results from having access to the completed New Testament (compare Romans 12:2; 2 Corinthians 3:18; 2 Timothy 2:15) rather than just fragmentary, incomplete prophecies.

12. For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

We should not equate this with a silvered glass mirror, which was not invented until AD 1835. Mirrors of the first century AD were made of polished metal, yielding dim and distorted reflections. Paul uses this to illustrate what is known *in part*. This contrast, again, is with what he will eventually (*then*) know fully as dim reflection gives way to full clarity.

As above, there are two major lines of interpretation. One line understands "fully" to be taken in a literal sense, as *face to face* observation; therefore "completeness" (1 Corinthians 13:10, above) would mean Jesus' second coming, when we "will see his face" (Revelation 22:4; compare Psalm 17:15; 1 John 3:2).

The other line of interpretation takes "fully" in a figurative sense of "clear communication" with God (Exodus 33:11; Numbers 12:8). This is seen to support the idea of the completion of the New Testament as God's definitive way of communicating his will as we mature in the faith.

D. That Which Is Supreme (v. 13)

13. And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

As Paul brings his discussion of Christian love to its conclusion, he emphasizes once more that which *remain* (endures) in an implied contrast to that which is temporary. *Faith, hope and love* form a trio that sums up the crucial elements that are at the heart of Christian living (see also Ephesians 1:15–18; Colossians 1:3–5; and 1 Thessalonians 1:3; 5:8). Love is not only greater than spiritual gifts, but it is the greatest of Christian virtues.

But there is a relative ranking to these three in terms of endurance. Since "faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see" (Hebrews 11:1), faith will no longer be necessary when Christ returns. In heaven, we will be walking by sight rather than by faith (2 Corinthians 4:18; 5:7).

Hope, too, is limited to our earthly lives only. What we hope for is eternal salvation (1 Thessalonians 5:8; Titus 3:7). And once we have it in its fullest sense, there is no more place for hope. After all, no one hopes for something that he or she already has (Romans 8:24)!

Love, however, towers over both faith and hope because love is eternally enduring. Love is a primary attribute of God (1 John 4:8, 16). For our part, “this is love: that we walk in obedience to his commands” (2 John 6).

Regardless of the view of “completeness” (1 Corinthians 13:10) one holds, we should not lose sight of what Paul was confronting and how. What the Corinthians needed more than anything in resolving conflicts over spiritual gifts was the attitude and practice of Christian love. Love was the starting point for addressing all the other issues mentioned in the letter—issues such as believers taking one another to court (6:1–8) and eating meat offered to idols (8:1–13). A lack of such love would stifle numeric and spiritual growth of the church. Love would move followers of Jesus—whether first century or twenty-first—beyond immature “me first” attitudes and behaviors and toward genuine Christlikeness.

Conclusion

A. The Clarity of Love

I started wearing glasses in the seventh grade. My teacher had noticed how much I was squinting to see the blackboard (yes, it was that long ago), so she suggested to my parents that my eyes be examined. True, said the optometrist, I was going to need glasses. When I went to pick them up, the assistant told me to look across the street before I put them on. I did so without much thought. After I put the glasses on, she told me again to look across the street. I could not believe how much clearer everything looked! I was stunned to, literally, see how much I had been missing.

The actions and attitudes of Christian love improve our spiritual view in critical areas. Without it, we are somewhat like the man in the village of Bethsaida to whom Jesus gave sight in a two-stage miracle (Mark 8:22–26). After “stage one,” Jesus asked him if he could see anything. The man replied, “I see men as trees, walking.” After “stage two,” the man could see clearly. Jesus was not content to leave the man’s ability to see in stage one. Neither is Jesus content that our own spiritual vision remain partially obscured regarding whom we should or should not extend his love through our own attitudes and actions.

The process can be seen as two mutually reinforcing, upward-spiraling reciprocals. First, as the clarity of our spiritual vision improves, we will begin to see more and more opportunities to express the love of Christ to others; and as we express that love, the clarity of our spiritual vision will be improved.

Second, this improved vision will cause us to see that to minister to others in love is to serve God (Matthew 25:34–40); “But whoever loves God is known by God” (1 Corinthians 8:3; compare and contrast Galatians 4:9; 1 John 4:19–21).

Because of Christ’s love, we do not view people as the world does. We see them as those for whom Jesus gave his life and who need “the message of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:19). The same love moves us to respond to those in need (1 John 3:16–18), the kind of “neighbor love” modeled by the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:33).

Those who have been baptized into Christ “have clothed [ourselves] with Christ.” Given that fact, it is (or should be) only natural also to “put on love” as Paul told the Colossian Christians to do (Colossians 3:14).

B. Prayer

Father, we live in a time where love is perhaps more desperately sought after than ever before. Forgive us when we become callous to the needs around us. Help us to follow the example of Jesus and to see others as he sees them. In his name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Love remains the primary form of “ID” for the follower of Jesus.