

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, 13th Sunday after Pentecost, Sept. 7, 2014

Love is Not Optional
Dr. Kenneth Humphreys
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Romans 13:8-14

Last Sunday I talked about Paul's instructions on how to live a godly life. In Romans 12:9-21, our scripture reading last Sunday, Paul enumerates thirty instructions on how to do this --- no fancy words, just short instructions.

In reality, those thirty instructions boil down to one thing, Jesus' second Great Commandment which is to love your neighbor as yourself. Love is not a suggestion --- it is mandatory for Christians --- it is obligatory. "*...love in the biblical sense obligates in a compelling sense. It locks us into active concern for others.*" (Preaching for the Christian Year A, Fred Craddock, et al).

In his book on Romans, Paul Achtemeier discusses our scripture for this morning. Among other things he says:

Love is ... the rule of the Christian life. But can love be a "rule?" Indeed, can love be commanded at all? Emotions are not that much under our control. To be commanded to love therefore appears to be totally unrealistic; and it will lead either to frustration, since we are being asked to do something we cannot do, namely love a person we find unlovely, or it will lead to sham and hypocrisy when we pretend to love someone we really do not love at all. How then are we to understand this command to "love?"

The beginning of the answer lies in understanding the kind of perversion the word "love" has undergone in our society, in our "world," as Paul would put it. The problem is that the word "love" has been so captured by Hollywood producers and the romantic novelists that it has come to mean either sheer sentimentality or else the feeling that comes over a person when an attractive member of the opposite sex comes into view. Love has therefore come to be identified with an emotional state.

That is not what the New Testament means by "love." That God loves us hardly means that he gets a warm feeling inside when he thinks of us. We know God loves us not because of the way he feels about us but because of what he has done for us:

He gave his son for our redemption.

What Paul and the rest of the New Testament mean by love therefore centers not on emotions but on actions. To love someone is actively to promote that person's good. To be commanded to love one's enemy means that one is commanded to work for that person's good, not harm. To love an enemy therefore does not mean primarily to change one's emotional state toward that person so much as it means to do good for that enemy, regardless of what one's emotional response to that person may happen to be. Love acts for the good of another. That is the love that Paul speaks of here, and that is the love that fulfills the law. ... such love means to cease actions that harm another person and to do what promotes that person's good.

“Love that fulfills the law.” Did you catch those words in the quote? What law?

The reference is to the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments, the Mosaic Law laid down by God on the tablets of stone given to Moses.

The first four commandments are summarized by the first Great Commandment set down by Jesus, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind.” The next six relate to loving your neighbor as yourself.

What Paul is doing in today’s reading from the letter to the Romans is reminding them of their obligation to love their neighbor.

According to Paul Achtemeier this “... centers not on emotions but on actions. To love someone is actively to promote that person’s good. To be commanded to love one’s enemy means that one is commanded to work for that person’s good, not harm. To love an enemy therefore does not mean primarily to change one’s emotional state toward that person so much as it means to do good for that enemy, regardless of what one’s emotional response to that person may happen to be.”

Wow! Paul is saying, just as Christ did, that even though you may not like your neighbor, show love by working for that person’s good. That is a tough thing to do at times, but it is what we are expected to do --- **no**, not expected --- **required**. It is our Christian obligation.

God does not like our sinful nature but, nevertheless, God loves us. Similarly, we are expected to act toward others in the same way.

In Mere Christianity, C. S. Lewis said. *"Do not waste your time bothering whether you 'love' your neighbor, act as if you did. As soon as we do this, we find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone, you will presently come to love him. If you injure someone you dislike, you will find yourself disliking him more. If you do him a good turn, you will find yourself disliking him less."*

Being a railroad nut, I very much enjoyed the movie, "The Bridge on the River Kwai" starring Alec Guinness. In that movie, Allied prisoners of war are forced by their Japanese captors to build a railroad bridge in the jungle over the River Kwai. The movie was based in part on a book, Miracle on the River Kwai by Ernest Gordon.

"The Scottish soldiers, forced by their Japanese captors to labor on a jungle railroad, had degenerated to barbarous behavior, but one afternoon something happened.

"A shovel was missing. The officer in charge became enraged. He demanded that the missing shovel be produced, or else. When nobody in the squadron budged, the officer got his gun and threatened to kill them all on the spot . . . It was obvious the officer meant what he had said. Then, finally, one man stepped forward. The officer put away his gun, picked up a shovel, and beat the man to death. When it was over, the survivors picked up the bloody corpse and carried it with them to the second tool check. This time, no shovel was missing. Indeed, there had been a miscount at the first check point.

"The word spread like wildfire through the whole camp. An innocent man had been willing to die to save the others! . . . The incident had a profound effect. . . The men began to treat each other like brothers.

"When the victorious Allies swept in, the survivors, human skeletons, lined up in front of their captors . . . (and instead of attacking their captors) insisted: 'No more hatred. No more killing. Now what we need is forgiveness.'" (Don Ratliff, The Christian Leader).

The men were brought together by an act of Christian love, the ultimate sacrifice of one prisoner for the others. When the prisoners were freed, they similarly loved their neighbors as themselves, in this case their Japanese captors, and forgave them.

I am sure that they didn't like their captors but they showed love for them by forgiving them.

In a sermon that I gave here a while back, I told you about my uncle who was a German prisoner of war and who suffered greatly during his captivity and nearly starved to death. When he was freed and returned home I asked him if he hated them. He said, "No. They were just following orders and they didn't have much more to eat than we did." That is a similar example of what it means to love your neighbor.

Origen said, *"The debt of love remains with us permanently and never leaves us; this is a debt which we both discharge every day and for ever owe."*

In his commentary on Romans, William Barclay said, *"If love is the mainspring of a man's heart, if his whole life is dominated by love for God and love for his fellow men, he needs no other law."*

In a few minutes we will celebrate the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper commemorating Jesus' ultimate sign of love for the forgiveness of our sins. As we partake of the elements, the bread and wine, remember that they are his sign of love for all of us.

Amen

