



As our verses begin today in Romans 13:8, the author of Romans, the Apostle Paul, is in mid-thought. He's instructing the Christian how to live as part of their pagan society.

Here's a sobering and depressing thought: societies have evil in them. Societies in our world are not loving, encouraging places because they're filled with people who are broken and sinful. It's like the same hope my wife has for a perfect marriage—it'll never happen! Because she and I are in the marriage and we're broken and sinful people.

As the Christian faces this, there are many common but wrong ways to respond:

- That's evil but (overly meek) I'm not much better, I guess I'll keep my mouth shut
- That's evil. (overly haughty) I used to be like one of you! I know better now. You're a bunch of fools! Whew! Look out!
- That's evil and I like that, I'll join in!
- That's evil and I'm scared. Let's move to the country, build a wall and cut off the world.

None of these are the Biblical way to respond to the unsaved, non-Christian society we live in. Instead, when we face the evils in the world:

- Romans 12:17 taught us—do not repay evil for evil.
- Romans 12:21 encourages us—don't be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good.
- Romans 13:1-7 teaches us how to respectfully and lovingly live as a citizen of a country, knowing that our governments will behave in ungodly ways.

These are the instructions he's given so far. Today, in Romans 13:8-14 Paul shifts to the people we live around, the people we bump shoulders with. He shifts from our impersonal role in the government to the personal interactions that fill our days. Our verses today address how we should interact with our neighbors.

I love these verses. We're not just going to react to evil with a shield of protection. God doesn't want his children to live in fear. Instead, God is describing a vision to change society for the better. He's going to tell us how Christians can make our cities a better place. That's something to live for!

Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law. 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." Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.

And 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. 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 carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh (Romans 13:8-14).

There are three thoughts in these verses I'll be focusing on today:

- » Love with the mindset of indebtedness
- » Clothe yourself with the armor of light—Jesus
- » A change in perspective can change everything

Love with the Mindset of Indebtedness

Verse 8 says let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another. Verse 9 says to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. Verse 10 says that love does no harm.

Paul is calling the Christian to respond to and engage our neighbors, the people we come in contact with, by becoming great doers of good. At your school, your job, your neighborhoods and your cities you're to consider the relationship dynamic as one in which you owe them love and more love and more love. It's like a debt that can never be paid off.

Paul is using this analogy because he knows how motivated people are to pay off their debts. No one likes being in debt because there's a sense of obligation with debt. The debt will restrict your behavior; you might not buy a new Samsung 55" curved SMART TV. You might not go to Cancun on an all-inclusive vacation. Why? Because these things are expensive and you already owe money to someone else.

It's the same logic with love in these verses. God is informing us that our behavior should be directed and restricted because of this debt of love we owe our neighbors.

If I don't owe my neighbor a debt of love, I'm free to think of my desires and opinions and needs first: I throw a party with a live band in my backyard every weekend; my dogs can run off leash and terrorize the neighborhood kids; my sprinklers can run seven days a week, regardless of the water restrictions. So there's some restricting of my behavior because of this debt. And there are acts of love—payments—that I make. The idea of owing a debt of love means that we lose the freedom of asking the question, "Should I love them?" The answer is always, "Yes. Love them."

This is something we can't get out of. We're locked in. But if you're like me, you're feeling uncomfortable because it's impossible to love like this. It seems like too much; it's an unfair expectation. I want to talk to Jesus and say, "Can we negotiate this? How about we soften the language and lower the expectation?" In His perfect wisdom, God anticipates this kind of response. He knows our weaknesses and inabilities. That's why we're not intended to love like verses 8-10 describes on our own.

Clothe Yourself with the Armor of Light—Jesus

In verses 11-14 the imagery of putting on and taking off clothing helps us visualize how a person could possibly love so sacrificially. Look at verse 12.

Let us put aside the deeds of darkness – put aside means to take off a garment.

Then in verse 13 these deeds of darkness are described:

- Carousing – drink lots of alcohol and behave loudly and obnoxiously
- Drunkenness – any substance that controls you
- Sexual immorality – lust, porn ... any manipulation of God's intended purpose for sexuality within the construct of marriage
- Debauchery - excessive indulgence in sensual pleasures
- Dissension – strong disagreements and arguments
- Jealousy – harboring a deep desire in your heart for anything someone else has

All of these are examples of what a person's life looks like when they are wearing the clothes of darkness. *"All of us also lived among them (non-Christians) at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath"* (Eph. 2:3).

In Romans 13:12 the follower of Jesus is being instructed to take that piece of clothing off. This is not who you are anymore. It's what you **were**. The righteousness of Jesus is a new jacket, an armor of light that we wear.

... put on the armor of light... Rather clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ (verses 12 & 14).

By wearing this, you are empowered to first say no to the deeds of darkness and second, love our neighbors as described in verses

8-11. You're not supposed to try to love on your own; that's a set-up for failure, for sure.

Here's a practical tip for how you clothe yourself in the armor of light. Spend a few moments throughout your day reminding yourself that you're already wearing this coat. Remember the rocks from Easter and the sermon from 2 Timothy 2:8, *"Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel."* By remembering Jesus is with you, you are clothing yourself. By remembering God's word, you are clothing yourself. By praying prayers of surrender to his will, you are clothing yourself. Have you been remembering more often lately? It will empower you to love the way these verses are describing. Our neighbors need us to love them. This is how we show them who God is. This is how we live as an ambassador in this world that isn't our true home.

Here's a Biblical example. The prophet Jeremiah called the Jewish exiles in Babylon to overcome the evil they were surrounded with by seeking the prosperity of their city. When Jeremiah wrote to them (Jeremiah 29), they were living in a secluded community cut off from the citizens of Babylon. He told them:

- Get involved in your city
- Don't compromise Biblical values but let people see your righteous behavior
- Build homes and settle down
- Get married and have a lot of kids
- Seek the peace (shalom) and prosperity of the city
- Pray to the Lord that the city prospers

Jeremiah was telling them to do the same thing Paul is telling Christians—overcome your ungodly society with sacrificial love and good deeds. For us today, this can be done in millions of ways. Every one of you have neighbors God is calling you to love and it's an adventure! *"But now, by dying to what one bound us (that's our jacket of the deeds of darkness) we have been released from the law so that we serve (we love) in the new way of the Spirit"* (Rom. 7:6).

I asked a bunch of people for examples of how they've been led to show love in this adventurous and unpredictable way. They were reluctant to share but I convinced some to cough up the stories! Here are some.

» A woman in our church heard we needed someone to pick up coffee and bring it to church. She said "I can do that." Later I learned that she doesn't even drink coffee or like the smell. She just wanted to serve her church.

» Last weekend a dad spent his weekend at Home Depot. While heading into the store he saw a lady with a flat cart with a couple large flower pots and about 50 plants. She was trying to get the momentum to push the cart over the speed bump. He asked if

he could help take the cart to her car. She was really happy to get the help.

» One lady did the laundry of her sister's family who were on a recent out of town trip.

» I know this guy who fries an egg and makes a cup of tea and brings them to the bathroom where his wife is frantically trying to get ready when she is late for something in the morning.

» One dad swam with his kids in a cold water spring on a recent vacation.

» One spouse, after an exhausting day, mustered the energy to give some special love to their spouse.

» One man became aware of a friend's need for a new liver. Without a new liver, this friend would get sicker and sicker before dying. This man volunteered to go through the organ transplant process and give 40% of his liver to his dying friend.

I was blown away and so encouraged by the stories I heard! These are real, sacrificial and intentional acts of love.

I'm reminded of the sacrifice Katniss Everdeen made for her sister in *The Hunger Games*. You remember the story: Her sister's name is drawn from the bowl of names. Frail and little Prim was randomly drawn to fight to the death in the Hunger Games. Immediately, her big sister Katniss raises her hand and says, "I volunteer as tribute." I remember reading this scene and this phrase hit me like a punch in the gut. Acts of noble, self-sacrifice always stir my emotions. This was an act of amazing love and it inspired her oppressed and ungodly world to action. The mocking jay sign became the sign of a revolution to overthrow their unjust government.

All of this got me wondering, do each of our acts of love work subversively to overthrow the unjust power structures of our world? Does the Holy Spirit use the millions of sacrificial and intentional acts of love for this purpose?

I think he does. God showed how one subversive act of love overthrew the power structures of the world in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. It was a sacrificial and intentional act of love when God did this. Think about it—this one act has changed the world more than anyone who's tried to fight for their rights or fight for power. God didn't try to overpower the world with more strength. He did it with love. And we still feel the effects today. *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life"* (John 3:16).

Let me give you one more example. This one is historical. In Rome if a couple didn't want a baby, they faced a dilemma. They didn't have the medically advanced methods we possess today to end a baby's life in the womb. So the women would deliver their baby and then abandon it on the rocks near the ocean or

in a field. While they didn't kill the baby, they left it to nature to determine its fate.

As people became Christians they started viewing everything in life through a new perspective, including this practice. Leaving babies to die was unthinkable. God created every life with dignity and purpose. They couldn't disengage and let this continue. But they couldn't change the laws or the behavior of a whole society. So the common practice was to take the babies home and raise them as their own. They performed a rescue adoption. It was because of behaviors like this that the book of John says, *"By this (acts of love) everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another"* (John 13:35).

Every small and large act of love changes the world, little by little. Because of this, God is instructing us to live continually with the mind-set of owing a debt of love to our neighbors. As you ponder this and consider your life, you might be inspired or you might feel ashamed. You know, every one of us could feel ashamed because we're all weak, broken, rebellious and selfish. All of us. No one here is perfect yet. If you were, you'd be dead because you'd be in heaven. We're all growing, taking spiritual steps forward and sinful steps backward.

The last thing Jesus wants you to know in these verses addresses this. It provides an insightful and convicting final thought to this subject.

A Change in Perspective can Change Everything

There are two changes in perspective in these verses. The first one is a wake-up call. In verse 11 Paul uses the phrase, "wake up from your slumber." Wake up to your ability to change the world through loving your neighbor. Wake up to the perspective that you never know when the end of life will come. That's what it says in verse 12.

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

I've noticed that as a person grows older and builds more stability in their life, they make their daily decisions with long-term implications in mind. Much of that is wisdom. However, when it comes to loving others, the long-term perspective clouds our thinking. Love isn't a currency to be saved for a rainy day. It's something to be given freely, without concern for tomorrow or next week.

The second change in perspective that serves as a wake-up call is this: Gratifying your desires is selfish.

... do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh (v. 14).

Wake up; your sinfulness doesn't just destroy you, it blocks you from loving others selflessly.

The earlier verses have an inspirational tone to them... love your neighbor, put on the armor of light, clothe yourself with the Lord Jesus Christ. This last phrase is a bold stark wake-up call:

don't think about how to gratify the desires of your flesh because when you do you're being selfish.

This one phrase contrasts the selfless act of loving our neighbors and the selfish act of our deeds of darkness, the desires of the flesh. We can't do both at the same time. They don't mutually co-exist. This is our call to take off the jacket of the deeds of darkness and put on the jacket of Jesus Christ.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ says that you can't do this on your own but with Jesus clothing and filling you, you can. When you surrender to Jesus daily, when you clothe yourself with Jesus daily, He can love through you in miraculous ways.

Just imagine how we are changing the peninsula with our acts of love. It is happening and it can happen more when we love our neighbors with the mindset of indebtedness.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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