

The Better, Harder Way

Romans 13: 8-14 Don't be in debt to anyone, except for the obligation to love each other. Whoever loves another person has fulfilled the Law. ⁹ The commandments, *Don't commit adultery, don't murder, don't steal, don't desire what others have*, and any other commandments, are all summed up in one word: You must love your neighbor as yourself. ¹⁰ Love doesn't do anything wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is what fulfills the Law. ¹¹ As you do all this, you know what time it is. The hour has already come for you to wake up from your sleep. Now our salvation is nearer than when we first had faith. ¹² The night is almost over, and the day is near. So let's get rid of the actions that belong to the darkness and put on the weapons of light. ¹³ Let's behave appropriately as people who live in the day, not in partying and getting drunk, not in sleeping around and obscene behavior, not in fighting and obsession. ¹⁴ Instead, dress yourself with the Lord Jesus Christ, and don't plan to indulge your selfish desires.

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Every now and then, something in the Bible surprises me. I run into something I haven't noticed before. A text suddenly has a meaning or a message that I just hadn't seen before. That's sort of what happened with this passage in Romans. The letter that Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome is what I call thick. It's full of heavy, serious, deep thoughts. In his letters to the Christians in Corinth, Ephesus, and Galatia, Paul spends a lot of time and ink writing to people he knows from his time spent in those places and he does a lot of teaching and correcting. He writes to them to tell them that they're misbehaving and that they have to "straighten up and fly right" as my Dad would have put it. In a lot of his letters, Paul is scolding people for screwing up and not behaving; they aren't modeling their life after the way that Jesus lived. But in Romans, one of the last letters that Paul wrote, he's dealing with "the big questions," deep theological questions and he's writing to people he's never met.

In this letter that's filled with complex theological reasoning about complicated issues, we come to today's short passage. Here's this nugget of wisdom – and this may be the oldest reference to these commandments in the New Testament. In the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and John, Jesus proclaims the Good News of these commandments. But Paul proclaimed today's text to the church in Rome 10 – 20 years before the first gospel was written. And the commandments presented here were first declared back in the ancient Hebrew documents of Exodus, Deuteronomy, and Leviticus in the Old Testament. God has been trying to get this message into our hearts ever since the beginnings of the relationship between God and humanity!

A few years ago, a guy named Jacobs thought it would a great idea to write a book about trying to obey every rule in the Bible for one year. He set out to try to obey not just the big famous rules like the Ten Commandments, but every last rule and law he could find in the Bible. According to Orthodox Rabbis, there are 613 laws in the Old Testament. That's a lot to try to remember and do, especially if you haven't been working at it for a long time. Don't steal. Don't kill. Rules like that are fairly universal, because most people recognize that they help protect everyone from harm. But rules about not wearing clothes made from two kinds of material or not eating certain kinds of meat aren't as obvious to us and are harder to remember.

Now, Mr. Jacobs wasn't a devout Jew or a devout Christian, so trying to obey all of the Biblical laws was an interesting experiment for him. If he acted like he believed in God by being obedient, would he come to believe in God? If he offered a required prayer of thanksgiving to God every day, would he become more grateful for what he

had? Do actions lead to belief? Or does belief lead to action? Which comes first – one's actions or one's beliefs? Which comes first?

“Here's Paul's answer: neither one. Action doesn't come first, nor does belief. What comes first is the love of God.”ⁱ

Sometimes, like Mr. Jacobs, we tend to think of the Bible as the rule book. Just find all of the rules and obey them and everything will be right in the end. All that matters is obeying the law. Do that and you'll get to heaven. Mess up, and the results are too terrible to think about. When we think of the Bible that way we reduce God to a mean school teacher with a ruler, ready to slap our hands and take a paddle to our butt every time we make a mistake. And we cheat ourselves out of an awesome relationship with a God who loves us.

The Bible is the story of how much God loves us and how persistent and overwhelming that love is. The story begins with the proclamation that all of creation is God's handiwork and craftsmanship and it is beautiful and good. Sleep with the window open and wake to hear the birds welcome a new day. Sit outside in the evening and watch the thousands of colors and hues bathe the western sky in a sunset. We pay good money to vacation in the mountains, in the forests, at the beach, and scores of other places because we see the love in the beauty of creation.

God reached out in love to a ragtag band of slaves in Egypt and rescued them. It's the story we call the Exodus and it shows how getting people out of slavery is just the beginning. Getting slavery out of the people is a longer process that takes patience and love that is long-suffering and unshakeable. The kind of patience and love that God has, that is God.

Century after century, despite being ignored, despite evil behavior of the most disgusting and cruel sort by the people, God continued to love, God continued to pursue, God continued to open everlasting arms to embrace the people.

And God came to us as a baby, growing up among us, living the life of a peasant in a conquered country, sharing humble meals, walking dusty trails, and treating friend and enemy with equal compassion and love. What comes first is God's love – always. God's love comes before anything else. We baptize infants, but not because they need to be washed in some symbolic way to make them acceptable to God. In baptizing our babies, we proclaim in action “that even before we can utter the word God, God claims us. God comes to us – not because of our own faith, not because of our own beliefs or actions, but simply because God loves us.”ⁱⁱ

Hear again what Paul told the Christians in Rome. Paul writes, “The Commandments . . . are all summed up in one word: You must love your neighbor as yourself.” Paul is saying that “We are not bound to a strict, legalistic, or literal following of the law.”ⁱⁱⁱ At first glance, that really seems to open up all kinds of relief from little detailed laws. You can wear the wool-rayon blend sweater with a clear conscience. You can enjoy ham and shrimp without qualms. Living by a rule of love instead of the rule of law is liberating.

But it is so much harder. There's no exact script to follow, no exact and precise rules laid out in black and white. And we quickly begin to miss that. How many times have you seen someone in the news who is cleared of a crime because they really didn't violate the law? “I did nothing wrong. All of my actions were completely legal and within the law.” Oh, they might have overcharged someone for shoddy work. They might have enticed them into a loan with exorbitant but legal interest rates. They might have bundled sub-prime mortgages and sold them to investors who had no way of untangling the contents of the bundle. They might have connived, misled, failed to reveal, but not have violated any specific law. Not having violated any law, not having crossed any clear line, they can declare, “I am not guilty. I did nothing wrong!” We like

the clarity of clear lines and black and white rules. There is no love, no compassion, no difficult decision – just color within the lines and nobody can touch you.

But God loved us before we even knew God and God calls us to love one another. That's harder than following simple rules. Suddenly we are faced with choices. Which choice is the most loving? The question ceases to be which rule applies? The question becomes, how would I want to be treated?

You child makes a mistake, behaves badly, and is suffering the consequences that naturally come as a result. Do you add punishment to the consequences already being suffered? Do you lecture her and say, "I told you so?" Do you hug her and tell her you know she hurts, but you still love her and know she can do better in the future? What would you want and need if you were in her place? What is the loving thing to do may not be easy. Every circumstance, every hurtful event, calls for wisdom and good judgment. It calls for empathy, for compassion, for love to be part of the decision process. That is hard. Rules are easy. "Love requires vulnerability, hospitality, forgiveness, risk, and trust. Love is hard and it asks us to do hard things. It asks us to live in community with people who are not just like us; it asks us to share our lives with those whom we do not always agree; it asks us to forgive one another's wrongs. Love asks us to do hard things."^{iv}

But God first and always loves us. "We aren't asked to love without knowing what it means to be loved. We aren't asked to forgive without knowing what it means to be forgiven." Each and every day we wake up to face tensions and uncertainties. But we wake up held by a love that will not let go of us, a love that has no end. Knowing that our day starts with our being loved, we can fill ourselves with love and let it overflow onto, and into, all we meet during the day. It isn't always easy. It is a harder, but happier, way to live. As we have received, so let us give to one another. Amen.

ⁱ Joann Haejong Lee, Living the Word, *Christian Century*, September 3, 2014, p 18

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