

Romans 13:8-10

Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, "You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet," and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ. Amen

What did you notice as all the scripture lessons were read to day? All of our lessons today fit carefully together. They all deal with the Christian's obligation and duty that he has to his neighbor. That is the duty and obligation that God has given us to not stand idly by while your neighbor is marching down a path towards destruction, but to do everything that you can to get your neighbor to turn around—to turn from his wicked ways—to turn from the error of his sins and LIVE!

In our first lesson, from Ezekiel 33, God told Ezekiel (and really all of us) that we are to speak on his behalf and that we will (at times) have to speak strong words of warning—something that definitely isn't pleasant to do, but is at times necessary for the ultimate good of our neighbor. Take special note! God takes this seriously! He told Ezekiel that if he failed to share God's warning against the wicked—he, Ezekiel, would have blood on his hands, he would be guilty of their blood. Really, what it would amount to in our courts today is the serious charge of negligent homicide—that by your inaction, you allowed others to perish and die.

This is not something that God wants. Instead, God wants the wicked to repent of their sins, to turn from their wicked ways and live. But what happens when we share a word of warning to those who are straying and they don't listen to us? Jesus taught us what to do with some practical steps which we heard about in our Gospel Lesson (Matthew 18). Go by yourself first to the one in error; then bring another with you if they persist in error; then finally, if we must, bring it before the church; and if that persistent sin is still held onto and it is clear that that person is guilty of a sin, then there is the command from Jesus to "treat that person as a pagan or tax-collector" which is called in the church "excommunication."

I think that all of us sitting here today would agree that having to do this is not fun (and if you think it's fun, if you take pleasure in pointing out other people's sins—in telling others that they are wrong, and evil and that you are better than them, then there are some serious issues that you need to deal with—Remember how Jesus spoke of that "log," that "plank" stuck in your own eye!). We must realize that no one is righteous, not even one! We are all in the same boat. You are not better than anyone else! By pointing out an error or sin to someone else, we are not being judgmental or assuming that we are better than them, or acting in any unfriendly, unloving, malicious way. NO! What God is clearly commanding us to do (in all of our lessons today) is to LOVE our neighbors—to LOVE them no matter what, even if it means that we have to really put ourselves out there in that tough position to tell them they are wrong and need to stop what they are doing. God wants us to LOVE them in a way that we will even show them TOUGH LOVE. As we look at our text today, we want to see that God is instructing us in how we must treat our neighbors. He tells us

Sermon Theme: Live in Love!

- 1. In God's forgiving love.**
- 2. In love for each other**

Have you ever read the book of Proverbs? It's a great book full of helpful practical advice. But when you do read it, beware—it is full of blunt and somewhat harsh language. For instance: (20:3) **"Any fool can start a quarrel."** Or (10:7) **"The name of the wicked will rot!"** Or (12:1) **"He who hates reproof—He who hates correction—is stupid!"** Sometimes people come across strong, blunt statements and phrases like these in the Bible and they are shocked! They even ask if it is right for God's Word to call people "Fools," "Wicked," and "Stupid." After all, isn't God about love and kindness? What is all this about?

Now the Bible clearly teaches that God is Love. He possesses a constant, nonstop love for us that is so great that we can't even fully understand it. Yet this Love of God is not a Love that overlooks or ignores the foolishness of our hearts or our actions. No! God is not a "sap;" God is not ignorant! He is not and cannot be taken advantage of. And most certainly, he is not going to try and take advantage of you. NO! God is not going to do anything harmful to you and he's not going to let you get away with anything that would be harmful to you! Why would he do that?! He is looking out for your best interests—even if that means that he has to call you "Foolish," "Wicked" or "Stupid." GOD IS LOVE—which means if he calls you "Foolish," "Wicked," or "Stupid" He's doing so lovingly! And granted, sometimes that can be difficult for us to swallow!

Every so often you hear the horror stories of a bad landlord. I heard of one landlord who was being accused of renting a house that was completely full of black mold. It was a total health hazard; but instead of addressing the issue, removing the mold, and fixing the problem, the landlord (who knew it was all there) put up new drywall over the mold and a fresh coat of paint over it and pretended that it wasn't there. He then rented the house out to an unsuspecting tenant and his family who started having some terrible health problems. The babies are sick constantly and the husband and wife were in poor health. One day, the man bumps into a wall and it crumbles and they discover this infestation of black mold that their landlord had tried to cover up. Was it right for that land lord to overlook the problem? Was it acceptable for him to pretend to be ignorant of that mold in his rental property? NO WAY! That's an example of extreme negligence if you ask me! Because of his actions—or rather, inactions, he wreaked havoc upon that young family! What needed to be done was a major overall to get to the bottom of the problem and to even tear everything out and start over if necessary.

God is nothing like this. He's not a lousy landlord! He is the exact opposite. Our almighty God is a God of perfect justice! He has to do what is right! If he knows of a problem—if there is any "mold of sin" growing anywhere in a person's heart, he's not going to cover it up or ignore it! He understands that it's very dangerous. He knows that it will wreak eternal havoc upon that person's heart! NO! Out of love and concern, God is going to do all that he can to get rid of it! Even if it means that he has to take some hammers and buzz saws of God's Law to that person's heart...Even if he has to shake that person's heart to the foundation...Even if he has to be totally blunt with that person and call them, you (and me) a "Fool," "Wicked," and "Stupid," in order to shake us and get us to see our sins, He's going to do it, because he's not going to put up with any "mold of sin" bringing destruction and decay to the structure of your heart.

It really points out the extreme seriousness of sin that God would go to such lengths—that he would resort to such jarring and blunt words and phrases in his Word. God does not take sin lightly, because as he tells us, **"The wages of sin is death..."** and **"Death has spread to all men because all have sinned."** That is the seriously sad situation that we have to deal with because of our sin!

Now let's shift gears a little bit. As Christians we serve as God's representatives. We are members of his "Family" -- part of his "Army". We are in his service. He has given us a work-order to go out on his behalf and to essentially go out and start repairing the havoc wreaked by sin. He wants us to go and identify and tell others the remedy to get rid of the "mold of sin" that is bringing destruction upon people. He wants us (of course) to do this first with ourselves -- to examine and expose and ask God to get rid of the sin in our own hearts; but he also wants us to also go and help other people dig that sin out of their hearts so that they might also be made new again, so that they might also be restored to that holy perfect condition, worthy of being in God's presence—worthy of belonging to God.

How do we do this? It sounds silly and cliché, but we let "Love be our guide" We keep to the words of our text: **"Owe no one anything, except to love each other....You shall love your neighbor as yourself. Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law."** All you need is LOVE! First of all, we want to have a Love for God and for his Word. Know what God has to say about things. Let his "Yes" be your "Yes," and his "No" be your "No"! Let his commands, his rules guide and direct us as to what is right and wrong. Yes of course, God gave all of us a conscience that can discern what is right and wrong, but our consciences along with the rest of creation have become corrupted by sin. We cannot always trust ourselves, or what we think or feel to determine what is right or wrong. No! We must listen to God. God gave us his rules. He has told us what is right and wrong. It is found in His Word. The Holy Spirit has uploaded God's grace into our hearts through God's Word so that we know what god's will is.

And when this is done, it is then impossible for us to be “judgmental” or “judging others”. We can say, and know “I am not the one judging. It is God’s Word that has already judged. I’m simply repeating what God says!” When we then share God’s Word—even his stern warnings and condemnations of sin—with others, we do so also out of Love. We do not want that person, our neighbor, to perish. We want them to be saved! We want them to have happiness and treasures in Heaven forevermore! But the only way for them to be found acceptable before God is to make sure they are free from that “mold of sin.” We want to warn them of their sin and to show them their sin that this is not in keeping with God’s Word. We want to in Love point out to them the error of their ways! Isn’t that the first step in any rehab program? Don’t you have to admit and see that you have a problem? Stop being in denial!

The preaching of the Law is not the end of Love though. That would be like taking a house and gutting it, getting rid of all the mold, but then leaving it unfinished! That is not an acceptable, worthwhile structure. The second step is that it needs to be restored to be made like new once again. And that is where we must share the Gospel. The Gospel alone can renew the hearts of people. The forgiveness of sins won by the perfect life and by the gruesome crucifixion of Christ, and which was secured and proclaimed to us in His resurrection on Easter Morning, is the only thing that can restore us! The great love that Christ Jesus has shown to us comes into our hearts through faith and fixes that disaster, that havoc inside of us that was wreaked by sin!

God puts his tools to work in our hearts so that we might be repaired and made new again—those tools of the Word and Sacraments (the Lord’s Supper & Baptism). These Means of Grace alone can help people—and that is where our Love is really shown to our neighbors. Yes, hearts need to be prepared for forgiveness. They have to first of all see that there is a problem with sin, and so we preach and share the law. We stand up and confirm among our neighbors what God says—what he is right and wrong. But, more importantly, we then help those people become like new—holy, perfect, and righteous before God by sharing with them the Love of Christ our Savior. We tell them how God wants to restore them—how he wants nothing more than to remodel and remake them so that they (like we) are acceptable and worthy of being in God’s presence—giving all of us, forgiveness!

We have a very important obligation and duty to our neighbors. We are to do as St. Paul says, and Love each other...follow the commandments... which are summarized simply by saying, Love your neighbor as yourself...Do no wrong to your neighbor, but seek to fulfill God’s will and command by Loving them. Realize that sometimes we must show tough love, we must point out the seriousness of Sin, but always do so lovingly—with compassion and mercy—acting as Christ did; with a heart full of Love, selflessly seeking to give our neighbors his salvation. All glory be to Him! Amen.