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Romans 13:8-14

29th Message

Brian Morgan

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# OBLIGATIONS: THE BOTTOM LINE!

*SERIES: WHATEVER HAPPENED TO ETHICS?*

I glanced through the newspaper last week to see all the good Super Bowl deals being offered. One advertisement had eighteen 50-yard line tickets including catered meals and a stay at a deluxe resort spa—all for \$95,000! Just to encourage you, vacations aren't always all they are cracked up to be. For example, ten years ago I decided that our family would tag along with my fellow pastor Paul Winslow.

Paul assured me that this would be the most adventurous vacation we ever took. He was going to lead several families from Peninsula Bible Church into the back roads of Idaho for three weeks where no one had been since the Pioneers. Then we were to proceed to Lake Chelan and over into Washington and Oregon. I thought this would be wonderful so I prayed about it. Since we did not have enough money to rent a motor home or trailer, we put the idea aside. Then one of the families in PBC offered us their brand new 27-foot motor-home for our vacation—free of charge, gratis, no obligation! I could hardly believe my good fortune!

When we picked up the motor-home, we found it even had a motorcycle attached on the back bumper. The husband took me around and showed me all of the amenities. He even loaned me his 15-year collection of fishing equipment and a barbecue.

When we got in the motor-home, he said one thing: "Make sure you swing wide on the turns!" When I brought this beautiful thing home, I had to circle in our condominium complex several times because I could not find a parking space. On the third time around, I heard a horrible noise. When I looked in my side mirror, I realized that the noise was coming from my vehicle. I had caught the bumper of a van, and it ripped the sheet metal off along the back, broke the ladder, pulled apart the side panel and bent the frame of the motorcycle. I was devastated! Since I could not reach the people who loaned us the vehicle, I called my friend Paul. He woke up his neighbor, and they worked all night with plywood, spray paint, caulking and nails to put this motor-home back together. Paul also offered to rebuild the motorcycle in Idaho. Off we went in the caravan!

You can imagine what this "free trip" had already done to me! My feelings of anxiety had increased exponentially. In Idaho, we drove on some logging roads I do not think most vehicles even attempt. I was scared to death that we were going to go over a cliff in this monster, and I hung onto the wheel for dear life looking straight ahead. When I finally got the courage to look in my side mirror, I noticed one of the compartment doors was open. That was where all of the fishing equipment had been stored! When we found a place to stop, I discovered that the fishing equipment was still there, but we had lost a sewer hose and the barbecue down a ravine.

Then we arrived at Lake Chelan! Paul reassured us that we could park the beast because the next part of our trip would be by boat. I thought with relief that I could finally rest. I immediately came down with the flu and was sick for the entire ride!

When we arrived in Cannon Beach, Washington, my friend said, "Let's get out and enjoy this beautiful sunset." That was when I discovered that the motorcycle, evidently too heavy for the mounting, was slowly pulling the back bumper off. What were we going to do? We could not put the bike on top. I was sorely tempted to sell it! We eventually found a man in town who could re-weld the bumper assembly. He did so, and we were off again!

We finally reached the last stop—Ashland, Oregon, and the Shakespeare Festival. Some friends of ours who live in the area said they would watch the motor-home while we attended the play. When we returned, they said, "You won't believe what happened! A pickup truck backed up into the motor-home, damaged the corner that you had fixed, and poked another hole in the metal near the side window." I finally went to the factory where the motor-home had been built and bought sheet metal parts. I took it back to its owners in a paper bag, and I said to myself, "There has to be a better way to enjoy life than travelling in a motor-home with me driving."

What does this have to do with Romans 13? How many of you have experienced life like this? You sense that life should have a spark of spontaneity about it and a freedom to love people, but you are so weighed down by a "motor-home" of obligations that you are tense and cannot even appreciate the simple things. Your life lacks any surprises. If this image fits you, I want you to trade in your motor-home for a backpack.

In Romans 12–13, the apostle Paul has been talking about our Christian obligations, and he has detailed them in regard to the Lord, the body of Christ, and the community. We ended last time by discussing our obligation to the government. Now Paul sums up all Christian obligations in verses 8–14 of chapter 13 by telling his readers that the bottom line of all our obligations is love. Paul wants Christians to live with this singular focus in their lives. In our text, he describes the enemy of love, the freedom of love, the urgency of love, and the practice of love. Let us first look at the enemy in verse 8.

## I. The Enemy of Love (13:8a)

**Owe nothing to anyone [be obligated to no one] except to love one another... (NASB)**

The apostle begins by saying there are bad debts and there are good debts. He tells us that if love is the bottom line, it requires freedom to be exercised. We can kill this freedom if we are in debt to others. Love and simplicity are bound together.

I did an experiment this month. I asked my wife Emily and my friend Patrick Cunningham to keep everything that comes in our mailboxes advertising something to buy. Our culture, as a friend of mine said, screams at us "to buy things we do not need with money we do not have to impress people we do not know." To date, the Morgan household has received over forty catalogues! The Cunning-

ham household has received even more! The apostle says that if we listen to these booklets, we will find ourselves burdened under the obligations. Once we buy all this stuff, then we have to maintain it and carry it with us. We are no longer free to love others because we are too busy meeting all these obligations.

When I was in Eastern Europe last year, I rediscovered the value of simplicity and the value of poverty. I stayed in the home of a couple who had very little money, no phones and nothing to repair. Since I did not take much money with me, I found I was free for the two weeks—free to study, free to read, free to pray, and free to sing. Most of all, I was free to love. The best gift we can give people is not material things; it is time. These people had plenty of time. It was a difficult adjustment coming back and returning to my normal setting amid all my obligations. I would encourage you in 1989, if you are in debt, to cut up your credit cards and unshackle yourself. Get out of debt! Live a simple lifestyle. Set yourself free from obligations so that you may love. Debt is the greatest enemy of love.

In verse 8b and following, the apostle describes the freedom that a lifestyle of love gives us.

## II. The Freedom of Love (13:8b-10)

**...for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law. For this, "You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet," and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbor; love therefore is the fulfillment of the law.**

The second aspect of love is its freedom. Paul tells us that when we begin to practice a lifestyle of love, we are freed from complexity. He says, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." In Judaism, the rabbis said there were ten commandments, but in the Torah there are a total of 613 commandments. Any faithful Jew was obligated to learn them all! After those, he also had to study the rabbinical commentaries on the commandments to know their meaning, and then there were commentaries on the commentaries. If that is not complex living, I don't know what is! Paul says life is easier than that. Love has a singular focus—to love your neighbor as yourself. That is the bottom line of all the commandments. If you know that, you know them all.

In the gospels, we never see Jesus hurrying around, busily meeting innumerable obligations. He was singular in his focus. When God put a neighbor in front of him, he was available to minister to him. He was free to raise the young girl from the dead. He could speak to a religious leader. He had time to love the Samaritan women. He was free to focus because his love was singular. He only listened to one voice, that of his heavenly Father. The Lord's commandments are not burdensome. If you are under a weight of performance, you are under the wrong law. There is only one voice to listen to and one neighbor to respond to.

With this freedom we are not only free from complexity, but also from accusation. Paul says love does not wrong a neighbor. Therefore, we do not have to worry about the negative commandments: you shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not bear false witness. If we are loving our neighbor, instead of committing adultery, we will be enhancing his home. If we are loving our neighbor, instead of murdering him, we will seek to enhance his life.

Since this is the "Sanctity of Life" Sunday, it is appropriate to expound upon the commandment "You shall not murder." This carries implications for abortion in our culture. When the commandment was first given, it had a technical meaning. Because life was made in the image of God, to take a life was viewed as an attempt to kill God. As Walter Kaiser says in his book on Christian ethics:

So sacred was life, that all violent forms of snatching it away caused guilt to fall upon the land...To kill a person was tantamount to killing God in effigy. That murderer's life was owed to God; not to society, not to the grieving loved ones, and not even as a preventative measure for more crimes of a similar nature.

The life taken was owed to God. This commandment referred to taking an innocent life criminally for one's own ends. But that is not all it meant. There was a positive implication as well which said, "If I am going to fulfill this commandment, I must cultivate the life of my neighbor instead of harm it. He has a right to his life." Therefore, the commandment also referred to taking a life through negligence. It could include manslaughter. If I dug a pit in front of my house, left it uncovered and someone fell into it, that would be a violation of this commandment. If I had a balcony and did not build a fence around its perimeter to protect my neighbor from falling off, I would be guilty of negligence.

In the case of abortion, Scripture clearly says that life begins at conception. God is concerned about that life. In Psalm 139, David describes himself: "I was wonderfully made in the depths of my mother's womb. And in that dark place God was forming me and knitting me together. He had thoughts about me and I had a destiny then. He was with me then and was with me through my birth. Then I awoke and I was still with him." Rather than supporting abortion, which terminates life and sheds innocent blood, we must say that when there is life we have every responsibility to cultivate that life. This means helping unwed mothers and mothers-to-be to follow a proper diet.

I remember seeing a television news report of Mother Teresa in the streets of Calcutta. The interviewer asked her, "What would you tell Americans regarding their view of abortion?" She did not say anything. Instead she picked up a little infant and held it in her arms. As she looked at its face and rubbed its cheeks, she said, "Are you what they are afraid of?" Then she looked at the camera and said, "Tell the Americans to give me all their children. I will love them." To me, Mother Teresa's answer reflects the positive implications of love.

When we are loving, there are no accusers. The law cannot get to us. We live without accusations because we are cultivating life. Once we unshackle ourselves from indebtedness, love leads to a new freedom and a new simplicity with no accusations.

The apostle describes the third aspect of love in verses 11-12.

## III. The Urgency of Love (13:11-12a)

**And this do, knowing the time, that it is already the hour for you to awaken from sleep; for now salvation is nearer to us than when we believed. The night is almost gone, and the day is at hand.**

Paul says that when we give ourselves to love there is an urgency involved. We cannot be lazy or slothful. This kills love. We can see this urgency historically in the Olivet Discourse. When the disciples asked Jesus about the destruction of Jerusalem, he was well aware

as he shared the gospel with the nation that the kingdom was at hand. Between the announcement of the kingdom and the day of the impending judgment, there was only a small window of time for Israel. In fact, it was one generation, 40 years. Jesus knew that there would be a limited time to embrace the gospel. Even as Paul wrote this letter in A.D. 66, there was an outbreak of persecution with a Jewish revolt. In A.D. 70, the entire Jewish state was destroyed! Therefore only 40 years passed between the announcement and the day of judgment for Israel.

The apostles knew that what God was doing with Israel as a nation was a microcosm, a small picture of what he was going to do with all the nations. Only a short window of time exists for the gospel to go out. We had better respond now! There is an urgency about it. The day has come! The light has come, therefore give yourself to this kingdom. How long do we have? We each have only one generation—maybe 40 years, maybe not. Therefore, we cannot be lazy about our love.

Last Friday night I had the privilege of attending a memorial service I will never forget. Dick Woitke, one of the members of our body, went to be with the Lord two weeks ago. When Dick was 35 years old, he decided to read through the Bible once a year. By the time of his death, he had completed at least 47 journeys through the Bible.

During the service, various people shared about what Dick had meant to them. At one point, an elderly Jewish man shared that he had lived in Germany in the 1930's. Dick Woitke saved his life by signing an affidavit that allowed him to come to the United States with the rest of his family. He said, "Dick did not even know me. He did not know what kind of people we were." Dick Woitke kept writing affidavits urgently because these Jews knew the handwriting was on the wall. With passion in his voice this man continued, "When we met Dick and Pat, their love showed them to be different people. Instead of being dominated by materialism they went to church, they read the Scripture, they gave their lives to people." Then he shared how Dick had lead him to Christ. The man wept tears of joy and love as he recalled such love shown to him by Dick Woitke.

I thought, "How many more Jews could have been saved if others had been as urgent in the situation?" How many abortions could be prevented? How many divorces stayed? How many suicides would be prevented if we would just go out and urgently sow the seed of love?

Love is free from impediment. It is singular in focus. And it acts in haste. Now we come to the practice of love in verses 12-14.

#### IV. The Practice of Love (13:12b-14)

**Let us therefore lay aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave properly [walk decently] as in the day, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual promiscuity and sensuality, not in strife and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts.**

Paul gives us three commands. I want you to picture this to see how to put on love. What do you do when you first get up in the morning? You get dressed! The Greek words for "put on" and "put off" have the idea of taking off old clothes and putting on new clothes. Notice Paul describes the new clothes as light. Just as Adam was given clothes of skins to walk blameless in the presence of God

in the garden of Eden, so now Jesus Christ with the new creation gives us clothes of light to walk in purity.

Therefore, when we get up in the morning, we have to choose between God and the devil. Whose clothes are we going to wear from our wardrobe? Are we going to wear all of our old associations? Or are we going to choose the armor of light? This is the first choice we must make.

Then we start walking in the community. Paul says, "I want you to walk decently in the community once you are dressed." The word "decently" is a word used of noble people, of gentlemen and noble ladies who were so well dressed that their clothes and behavior commended them to others. At the Presidential Inauguration last week the Marines in attendance were in their dress blues. There was nothing out of place on their uniforms, and they carried themselves with proper decorum. How would you have felt if they had arrived dressed as slobs? They were well dressed because they were being presented to the Commander-in-Chief.

The apostle says we represent the King of kings. Therefore, as we walk in this world, we can no longer do the things we used to do. Paul gives us a list.

First, we cannot get involved in carousing and drunkenness. This means we cannot celebrate in the same manner as before. The word "carousing" first referred to "a festal procession in honor of the Greek god Dionysus." Then the word came to be used for any joyous feasting or long parties associated with the victor of athletic contests.

I thought, "How appropriate to discover this word on Super Bowl Sunday!" Today you are free to watch the game. You just can't get drunk and party all night. Love does not celebrate that way. I think our culture uses its athletic contests as an excuse to get drunk. Isn't any game an excuse to have a long party? Paul says we cannot do that any more. We represent the King.

Second, the apostle says love is not obsessed with sex. It does not practice sexual promiscuity or sensuality. Love does not give itself to or feed on licentious desires. Our culture has gone downhill. All the walls of protection have fallen from the television and the news media. With the advent of VCRs and videos, all the walls are gone. I encourage you parents to protect your children. Even the advertising is sensual. This exposure creates fantasies to which the viewers become addicted. And the desires escalate until we cannot satisfy them. This destroys love.

Third, we are not to act as the world does, with jealousy and strife, with regard to relationships. If you do not believe me, go to work and watch your co-workers. We are no longer to envy one another for this breeds contention.

On Monday, I took my two daughters skiing. On our way home, while they were sacked out in the back of the station wagon, or so I thought, my friend Brad asked me about how I was doing. At the time, I was experiencing low self-esteem and was envious of other people. As I began to speak, contention poured forth from my mouth. All of a sudden, I heard this voice in the back seat, "Daddy, I have some advice for you." I turned around and up came this head between Brad and me. She said, "Why don't you just be yourself and don't try to take on more than God has given you to do? You always get in trouble when you try to take on more." I thought, "Out of the mouth of babes"! What a rebuke!

The apostle says we are to get dressed, walk decently and finally "put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh in



regard to its lusts.” If we are going to walk in love in the community, there are three enemies to watch out for. We know two—the devil and the world. There is one more, and it is probably worse than the other two for he resides within us—the flesh. When the Bible first describes sin in the body, it pictures it as a beast with a voracious appetite. Remember when Cain sinned? God said to him, “Cain, you are in trouble. There is a beast called sin, and it is crouching at the door like a lion. If you give it provision, if you feed it, it will devour you.” Later on, we have the story of Joseph and his brothers. Remember when they threw him into the pit? Twice they said, “Let us throw him into the pit and then we will say a wild beast ate him.” The very next verse says that they threw him into the pit and they ate. The author is making the point that the wild beast was within them.

As we grow in the Lord Jesus Christ, as much as we try to love others, we realize that deep within us is a hidden propensity for evil. In my heart, this sin, or flesh, never wavers. We wish there was something we could do to get rid of it, but there is not. I find that the sin in me never yields; it never gives up. It may lie dormant at times, but it is always there. Paul says, “Now that you are walking, picture yourself as having a big dog at the end of your leash. Don’t feed him! Starve him! If you make provision for him, he will devour you.”

The first choice we must make in the morning is to put on Jesus Christ and his wonderful light. In order to do this, we have to put off our old clothes of darkness. Second, we have to walk decently. We are representing the King in our community. Third, we must starve this beast at the end of our leash. He may look harmless, but he is always there. Wherever we go in the community, this dog is present with us. We cannot make provision for this animal. We cannot feed it. We cannot think it harmless.

On the outside, it may appear that we are not making provision for this beast. We may look clean, but we all have hidden areas. Gordon MacDonald wrote *Rebuilding Your Broken World* after being healed from an adulterous affair. He confessed it was easy to make provision for the flesh, having hidden secrets that no one else knew. We can walk decently in the community and look upright even when we have secrets and gates through which the beast has access to us. MacDonald has labeled different ways we cover up these secrets:

Some do it with the facade of an unusually passionate concern for theological and doctrinal correctness. They keep everyone on the defensive with their accusations and suspicions. Some cover up by being extremely emotionally expressive in their spiritual lives. We find it hard to doubt the sincerity of someone who seems able to weep or rejoice at key moments. Others cover up through a style of never-ending business and activism. Who can find fault with someone who is always serving, always giving, always leading?

Paul says the practice of love involves three steps. We are to get dressed. Then we are to start walking decently in the community and avoiding the world. Finally, never forget the beast, and never feed it. How many of you are already following these steps? If you are not, do you want to enter into this lifestyle of love? Are you seeing it as a higher level of life?

Perhaps, you feel pulled down from within. There is an intense struggle being waged in your soul. If this is the case, consider the story of Saint Augustine. Romans 13 was the very text that led him to the Lord in the fifth century. Like us, he struggled with stupid little sins while he watched Christians who were rising, soaring and leaping. He saw himself, the scholar, weighed down in the banality of emptiness. He was in the garden of his friend Alypius discussing these things when this passage came alive for him. He wrote:

I now found myself driven by the torment in my breast to take refuge in this garden, where no one could interrupt that fierce struggle, in which I was my own contestant, until it came to its conclusion...I tore my hair and hammered my forehead with my fists; I locked my fingers and hugged my knees...I was held back by mere trifles, the most paltry inanities, all my old attachments. They plucked at my garments of flesh and whispered: “Are you going to dismiss us?...From this moment on you will never again be allowed to do this thing, or that, for evermore.” I probed the hidden depths of my soul and wrung its pitiful secrets from it, and when I mustered them all before the eyes of my heart, a great storm broke within me, bringing a great deluge of tears.

I stood up and left Alypius so that I might weep and cry to my heart’s content. I moved away far enough to avoid being embarrassed even by his presence. Somehow I flung myself down beneath a fig-tree and gave way to the tears which now streamed from my eyes...I felt that I was still captive of my sins, and in my misery I kept crying “How long shall I go on saying ‘Tomorrow?’ Why not now?” I was asking myself these questions, weeping all the while with the most bitter sorrow in my heart, when all at once I heard the sing-song voice of a child in a nearby house...repeating the refrain *Tolle, lege! tolle, lege!* (“Take up and read! take up and read!”)

So I hurried back to the place where Alypius was sitting, for when I stood up to move away I had put down the book containing Paul’s epistle. I seized it and opened it, and in silence I read the first passage on which my eyes fell: “Not in reviling and drunkenness, not in lust and wantonness, nor in quarrels and rivalries. Rather, arm yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provisions for the flesh in regard to its lusts.” No further would I read, nor had I any need; instantly, at the end of this sentence, a clear light flooded my heart and all the darkness of doubt vanished away.

Where are you, Augustine? I am sure there are many who want to love yet find their love impeded by materialism, laziness, legalism, or compromise. If you, like Augustine, want to give up the world, the flesh and the devil, give your heart to God.

Do it now! Amen.

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