

Romans 13:8-14

Righteousness in Conduct, Directed by Love

Verse 8

The term "what you owe him" in v. 7 leads Paul to make the general pronouncement that we as believers should not owe a debt to anyone. The only thing we owe each other continually and, thus, must "pay," is love for one another. This love is the fulfillment of all God's commandments. Love does not abolish the law, nor replace it, but it is its fulfillment. The law is fulfilled in acts of love.

"One another": the obligation works two ways; when the other does not love us, we still must love him. (See Glossary #21.)

Verse 9

After thus discussing the fifth commandment (13:1-7), Paul now mentions the other commandments of the second table, in this order: 7,6,8,10. The order of 7,6,8 is also found in Luke 18:20 (different from Mark 10:19) and James 2:11; and earlier already in some Greek Old Testaments of Deuteronomy 5:17-24. We have no explanation for this. It does not really make any difference either. Paul is not going to discuss these commandments as extensively as the fifth one, but he gives the summary which supplies the tenor, the basic commandment of all the other commandments: Matthew 22:39. (cf. Mark 12:30,31; Luke 10:27; also Leviticus 19:18)

Verse 10

"Love does no harm to its neighbour": "harm" refers to all that is forbidden in the sixth through tenth commandments. Fulfilling God's commandments is beginning to live according to all the commandments of God (Heidelberg Catechism, A. 91 and 114).

Verses 11-13

In these verses Paul continues to speak about keeping God's commandments, based on the commandment of love, but he introduces a new element, the time factor: the advancing and, therefore, pressing time. Paul uses a word (*kairos*) which means: a certain point in time, a decisive point, an auspicious moment. The word "hour" is an attempt to define the right moment even more closely. Paul means: we believers don't have a moment to lose! Now is the right time to fulfil God's commandments.

"Salvation": the completion of salvation on the last day when Christ returns is meant. This fullness of time is coming closer by the minute! The images of "slumber" and "wake up", "night" and "day", "darkness" and "light", "fight"[RSV]

and "armour" (vv. 11ff.) occur often in Paul's letters (see, e.g. Ephesians 5 and 6; and 1 Thessalonians 5).

Speaking of the dawning of the great day of Jesus' return, Paul almost automatically portrays the goings on in this world as nightlife (cf. 12:2). For people who take part in this, the breaking of the dawn is often an unpleasant experience. The darkness hides things. As long as it is night and decent people are asleep, their visits to bars and houses of ill repute are not really known. But woe to them when the light surprises them! Then their debauchery is suddenly plain for all to see. Soldiers, especially, cannot risk that. For them, daybreak means, roll-call! They must fall into line in full armour. Therefore, says the apostle, believers must not give in to the lusts of their old nature, but arm themselves. With what? With Christ! (In order to understand how Paul can carry this metaphor this far, cf. Ephesians 6:14: "the breastplate of righteousness", and 1 Corinthians 1:30 Christ is our righteousness.) (D. Holwerda)¹

"Deeds of darkness": see Romans 1:18-31; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11; Galatians 5:19-21; Ephesians 2:1-3; 5:11ff.

"The armour of light": see Romans 6:13 and Ephesians 6:11-17. The fruits of the Spirit, named in Galatians 5:22, can also be called armour of light.

Verse 14

"Clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ." Paul often uses the image of "putting on" that is, covering oneself with something or someone. See here 13:12 (armour); 1 Corinthians 15:53,54 (the imperishable and immortality); Galatians 3:27 (Christ); Ephesians 4:24 and Colossians 3:10 (the new nature); Ephesians 6:11,14 and 1 Thessalonians 5:8 (the whole armour); and Colossians 3:12 (compassion). Covering oneself with someone or something means: take hold of something or someone in faith in order to wrap oneself up in it, as we wrap ourselves in a garment (hence the word: clothe). Thus, clothing ourselves with Christ means becoming one with him, appropriating him in faith in such a way that he is our life and our defence and weapon in the fight against sin and sinners. It is being absorbed in him completely.

"Do not think about how to gratify the desire of the sinful nature": "sinful nature" is "the flesh" [RSV], the unbelieving and ungodly way of life. We may not cultivate that so that sinful desires are aroused. It is possible to eat and drink in such a way that lust develops.

B. Main Thoughts

1. In vv. 8ff. the apostle touches on the heart of the matter: fulfilling God's law is only possible when the love of God through his Spirit controls our attitude to

¹ Ed. Note: Quote is from *0 diepte des rijkdoms* (1949), p. 74.

our neighbour. In the believer, love, as opposed to hate, is from God, so that he gives himself to the LORD and to his neighbour in deeds of love. For love is not only an inclination, but also a deed in which it is manifested.

2. It is remarkable that also here the apostle upholds the law of God and sees its fulfilment in love. (See also Romans 3:31 and 8:4).
3. The sentence "Love does no harm to its neighbour" (v. 10) is often misinterpreted to mean that love can neglect all the commandments of God. It is thought that all that stems from love for each other is good. That would mean that love is not regulated by any law of God and man. Prof. Lekkerkerker wrote the following regarding v. 10 in his commentary:

Does this statement (of the apostle) mean that love may dismiss all norms and commandments and think only: "do not wrong the neighbour"? So, when a man and a woman have a sexual relationship outside marriage, this may not be condemned on ethical grounds, even when the relationship is later terminated, because this is a case of honest love? Or when a married couple decides to end their marriage without hurting others, for instance, because there are no children involved, that this divorce may not be condemned? Or that when homosexuals have a sexual relationship with each other this must be considered acceptable, since they do not wrong others? The morals of our time are undeniably moving in that direction, and also in church literature we can read articles with the title: "What happens in love cannot be condemned on ethical grounds." But it is necessary to stress that love is the fulfilling of the law. The commandments that presuppose the bond of marriage to be unbreakable, the creation of the parties as husband and wife with the mandate to live together and bear responsibility for one another, so that sexual intercourse finds its real place only within marriage, and that extra-marital love shortchanges the neighbour - these commandments are not "abolished" in love, but they accompany it and their benefits are only realized in love. Everything depends on the meaning of the word "fulfilment."²

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² Ed. Note: Quote could be from *Römer 7 und Römer 9* (1942).