

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, Texas
6 September 2026

Romans 13: 8-14

For the last few weeks we have had a number of great passages from Romans in our Sunday Lectionary, but I chose to preach on Matthew 14 to 16 because of the importance of these chapters in understanding how Jesus' ministry changes after the death of John the Baptist. Today, I would like to say a few things about the passages from Romans 12 and 13. The letter has two main sections, chapters 1-11 and 12-16. Many call the first, "Paul's doctrine on Salvation by faith" and the second, "Paul's ethical mandates." As such, many believe the first section is truly the meat and potatoes of the letter and the second is just a few things Paul says about the Christian life. This is a mistake. The second section is as important as the first and a natural outflow of the first section. Having built a solid foundation, Paul now shows us how that foundation is lived out in real life.

During the first section of the book, Paul makes a clear argument: Before Christ came people were slaves to a debt called sin. Worst yet, they could never pay the debt, because the price was just too high. In first century Palestine, when a person could not pay their debts they either went to debtors prisons or, most commonly, became a servant, no better than a slave, of the one to whom they were indebted. Often, even their entire family was forced into slavery as a result of the debt. Spiritually speaking, no one could be fully obedient to the Law, and this inability to obey the law made them sinners. Unable to pay the spiritual price for their sin they became slaves to sin. Sin controlled their lives and had a hold on them that was unbreakable even when they offered animal or grain sacrifices.

These practices were meant to help reduce the debt, but the sin was so great that animal sacrifices were never enough. As a result, God's people became enslaved to their passions. They became unavoidably chained to the high demands sin placed on their lives. But God sent his Son to pay the price of sin and the debt was wiped clean. When followers of Jesus became believers and accepted baptism, they and us accepted to die with Jesus. It is this death that initiates our freedom from the captivity of sin. Slaves who die are considered free. Therefore once we died with Jesus on the cross, the hold of sin on our lives disappeared, the bonds of oppression were loosed, and we finally defeated the powers of darkness. But we, believers, did not just die with Jesus, we also rose with him in his resurrection. We passed from death to life and from slavery to freedom. And when we rose again spiritually, we were born free in the Messiah.

Now, we have freedom and can choose to honor God without fear of sin because Christ has conquered sin on our behalf. We can now worship God in freedom with minds and hearts and souls centered on him. This movement from sin and death to freedom is what Paul calls salvation through grace, and he makes it clear that we do not obtain that grace through works of the law (sacrificial system and the mandates of Torah) but through faith alone, “less any person should boast.”

And this is where Paul begins chapter 12. Since by the mercies of God Christ paid for our salvation and secured our freedom from slavery, then we have choices we can make, we are free to worship God as we please and we are free to love others as Christ has loved us. Now we can choose a better sacrifice than the sacrifice of animals and grains. We can offer ourselves as a living sacrifice. Then Paul gives us concrete examples as to how we can dedicate our total lives to the service of God and God’s people. This is what he says,

Chapter 12: Therefore, on the basis of mercy (grace),

Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God

Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed...

Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought to think.

We have different gifts, but we are one body and members one of another.

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil; hold fast to what is good;

Love one another with mutual affection;

Outdo one another in showing honor.

Do not lag in zeal; be ardent in spirit; serve the Lord.

Rejoice in hope; be patient in affliction; persevere in prayer.

Contribute to the needs of the saints; pursue hospitality to strangers.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.

Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep.

Live in harmony with one another;

Do not be arrogant, but associate with the lowly;

Do not claim to be wiser than you are.

Do not repay anyone evil for evil.

So far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

Never avenge yourselves but leave room for the wrath of God.

If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them a drink,

Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good.

Then after seven verses about the necessity and obligation to obey civil governments and pay taxes (13:1-7,) Paul arrives at 13: 8-14, our passage for today. He says, “Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.” This is an incredible statement. The expression

“Owe no one anything” is remarkable because Paul and the Romans live in an “Obligation-Bound” and “Obligation-Saturated” culture. The average Judean owes allegiance and honor to their Masters for those who are servants, to their bosses for those who are employed, to their patrons for those who depended on patronage for their survival, to their spouse for women and children, to the Temple and the priestly class, etc. Additionally, they owe obedience to all civil laws, to Ceasar, to Herod and his family, to local magistrates, etc. Not including actual debts of money or service to neighbors, family, employers, and other, and the obligation to pay taxes, and to obey the multiple regulations of Torah, or their religious law.

Paul is NOT saying, “Disregard all your debts and obligations. Or refuse to obey civil law or pay taxes.” In fact, in the section before he made it clear that disciples must be subject to the authority of governments and must pay taxes. The particular case here is religious law. When a disciple choses to love others, he or she in fact fulfills the law. All commandments not directly related to God are fulfilled when you love another person. The believer is then not obligated to perform dozens of actions meant to separate Judeans from their Gentile neighbors or meant to create marks of distinction between male and female, slave and free, rich and poor. The fulfilment of the law (purity regulations, avoiding certain foods, killing animals in a certain way, regulations on how to cook certain foods...) was the way to separate Judeans from Gentiles. The question, “What is a Judean?” was answered, “He or she who follows the traditions of the elders and obeys Torah.”

But, since Christ fulfilled the law on behalf of all believers and our salvation is a free gift by grace alone through faith in Christ alone, then believers are no longer obligated to the law. “Love of one another, understood through the lens of the cross, means giving up our claims to ourselves and our claims over others, however they might seem right and just according to our own cultural narratives.” (www.WorkingPreacher.org.) We can summarize the first four commandments by saying, “Love God above all things” and the last six, “Love each other as you love yourself.” These two mandates summarize the complete law. Therefore, anything we do and say which doesn’t fulfil the obligation to love is an offense against God.

Paul believes his people are on the final stretch, “For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers.” The most important action a believer can take as we await the return of Christ is to love others with complete devotion, not because others are perfect, and not out of reciprocity. The love of others in freedom is the fruit expected of those who have been born a new in Christ the Messiah, the Son of God who forgave all our debts through his sacrifice on the cross.

May he continue to bless you, Amen!