

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, June 11, 2017**

## **UNDERSTANDING THE TIMES**

### **Romans 13:8-14**

#### **INTRODUCTION: TOLLE LEGE**

Aurelius Augustinus, better known as St. Augustine, was born in North Africa (part of the Roman Empire) in 354 AD to a devout Christian mother named Monica and an unbelieving father, Patricius, who became a Christian on his deathbed. As a young man, despite the unceasing prayers of his mother for his salvation, Augustine lived a hedonistic lifestyle, sowing his wild oats, denying himself nothing he desired, confessing later that he had been a slave of lust. It was during this period, prior to his conversion to Christianity, that he famously prayed: “Lord, make me chaste, but not yet.”

In the summer of 386 AD, while serving as a professor of rhetoric in Milan, Italy, Augustine had an experience that profoundly and permanently changed his life. Sitting in the garden of a friend, overcome by a sense of his sinfulness and its hold on his life, almost persuaded to begin a new life as a follower of the Lord Jesus – almost, but not quite – he heard the sound of a child singing in a nearby house: “*Tolle lege! Tolle lege!*” (Which means “Take up and read! Take up and read!”) Augustine took this to be a message from God to open the Bible and read from it. Opening the Bible that lay on a table next to his friend, his eyes landed on these words: “Not in riotous living and drunkenness, not in sleeping around and debauchery, not in bickering and envy, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the lustful desires of the sinful nature” (Romans 13:13-14).

God used these words from His Word – from our text today in Romans 13 – to bring Augustine over the goal line of true surrender, repentance, and saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. In his autobiographical *Confessions*, he wrote: “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.” In that moment he opened his life to Christ and felt the cleansing power of the Savior’s love. He was never the same again.

Within a decade, in 396 AD, he became the Bishop of Hippo in North Africa, where he continued to serve until his death in 430 AD. Long considered one of the greatest of the Church Fathers, Augustine’s writings influenced both Martin Luther and John Calvin, and continue to influence Reformed theologians today.

Let Augustine’s testimony be an encouragement to you – to me, to us – to take up God’s Word, to read it, and to apply it faithfully to our lives under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Today’s Scripture reading from Romans 13, consisting of two brief paragraphs, is chock full of instructions in Christian living for us. And it is every bit as true and trustworthy and relevant and powerful as it was in the 1<sup>st</sup> century when Paul wrote it, or in the 4<sup>th</sup> century when God used it to answer the fervent prayers of a godly mother named Monica. So, let’s

take up God's Word and read. Let us give our full and reverent attention to the reading of God's holy Word from Romans 13:8-14.

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I should tell you right up front that we won't get through both of these paragraphs this morning. There is just too much in each paragraph, brief as they are, to do justice to them in the time we have today. So, we will take the first paragraph – verses 8-10 – today, and then come back next Sunday and look at verses 11-14, with Paul's call to distinctive Christian living in light of the times in which we live.

### **OUR DUTY TO LOVE**

The first paragraph – verses 8-10 – is about our duty as Christians to love others. It is a theme Paul has already emphasized in Romans 12:9-10, where he reminds us that “love must be sincere” and that we are to “be devoted to one another in brotherly love.” Love is not an optional extra in the Christian life. It is an absolute essential, and ought to be *the* defining quality of your life. Of my life. Of our life together in the community of the church. Whatever other people may see in us or say about us, our love for God and for one another ought to be indisputable.

Five times in these three verses in Romans 13, Paul uses some form of the word *agape*, which is the distinctively Christian word for love in the New Testament. It is the kind of love with which God loves us. It is the kind of love Jesus demonstrated for us in His coming to live among us, and in His suffering and death on the cross for us. It is a self-giving, self-emptying, self-sacrificing love that seeks what is in the best interest of the one who is loved. As it says in 1 John 4:10: “This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice to take away our sins.” Because God loves us with this kind of love, just as we are, all our faults and failures and our indefensible record of rebellion against Him notwithstanding, it only makes sense that we should love one another – that we should love others – with the same kind of love with which God loves us. It is our Christian duty to love others as an expression of our love for God and our gratitude for His love to us.

### **OUR DEBT OF LOVE**

But love, Paul says, is not only our duty. It is a debt we owe – an unpaid debt we owe – to every person without exception. Some people are easy to love. Right? It is no problem to love the people in your life who are easy to love and who love you in ways that make you feel loved and valued. But not everyone is so easy to love. Even in the church. Even in the fellowship of believers. There may be someone in our church family – or more than one someone – who rubs you the wrong way. Someone who does or says things in a way that gets under your skin? It's true, isn't it?

The rule is that we're supposed to love each other. When we do it – when we love the other person with the love of Jesus – we fulfill God's law. Totally. The whole of God's law can be condensed into these two commandments, as Jesus says in Mark 12:29-31, in response to a

question about which is the most important commandment in the law: “The most important one,” Jesus says, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.”

If you want to please God with your life, make it your aim above all else to love Him with everything you are and everything you have, and love others the way God has loved you. If you do this, you will fulfill the law completely. Of course, none of us is capable of doing it perfectly, because of our innate sinfulness. Which is why Jesus came to give His life as a substitutionary sacrifice for us. As Peter says: “He Himself” – Jesus – “bore our sins in His body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness. By His wounds you have been healed” (1 Peter 2:24).

What wondrous love is this, O my soul!

### **LOVING “THE OTHER”**

Back to the debt of love we owe. It is not just the “one anothers” we enjoy being with that we are instructed to love. In verse 8, right after he speaks of our “continuing debt to love one another,” Paul changes his vocabulary and says, literally, that “the one who loves *the other* has fulfilled the law” (emphasis mine).

Who is “the other” that Paul has in mind? The word he uses here is a form of *heteros*, which refers to “one of a different kind.” A *heterosexual*, for example, is a person attracted to the opposite sex, as God intended when He created us in His image, both male and female. This is an inherently good kind of different. Here in Romans 13, “one of a different kind” includes people who are different from us in their beliefs, in their theology, in their politics, in their personality, in their income, in their race, in their ethnic background, in their values, tastes, and lifestyles. When you think about it this way, you know it is impossible to fulfill the law, because there is no way you and I can love everybody who is different from us, and there is no way we can perfectly love those who are closest to us. Only the saving love of Jesus, and the indwelling presence and sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit at work in us can enable us to grow in our ability to love “the other” who is different from us with the love of Jesus. We can’t do it. But He. Is. Able. More than able. And God’s love, the *agape* love incarnated by Jesus, is the most powerful force in the world.

### **LOVING YOUR NEIGHBOR**

In verse 8, as we have seen, Paul speaks first of loving one another and then loving the other. In verses 9 and 10, he harkens back to the language of Leviticus 19:18, which Jesus quoted in defining the second great commandment, to “love your neighbor as yourself.”

The thing about loving your neighbor, to paraphrase English writer G. K. Chesterton, is this: We get to choose our friends. We choose our enemies (or perhaps our enemies choose us). But God chooses our next-door neighbors. And, says Chesterton, we have to love our

neighbors because they are there. Regardless of how different or annoying they are. The nearness of our neighbors, adds Rosaria Butterfield, is providential – it is a God-thing – “because God never gets the address wrong” (Butterfield, *Openness Unhindered*).

Have you ever thought about that? My neighbors are my neighbors by God’s design. Your neighbors are your neighbors by God’s design. Our neighbors here in Kingstowne, in what we’re calling the “red zone” because of the high percentage of residents who have no faith involvement, are your neighbors by God’s design.

Obviously, there is a geographical component in the meaning of the word “neighbor.” But, as Jesus points out in the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), nearness is not the only factor in being a good neighbor. Your neighbor is anyone in your sphere of influence who has a need with which you can help, whether next-door or down the street or halfway around the world. Your neighbor’s need may be financial. It may be a need for food or shelter or clothing. It may be an emergency of some kind. It may be a need for handyman expertise. Or for a listening ear. Or for a babysitter. Or any of more than a hundred other things.

Loving your neighbor means caring enough to make connections and get involved in the lives of your neighbors. Too many of us, I fear, are too preoccupied with other things and either miss the opportune moments or fail to see the importance of actively pursuing relationships with our neighbors. I’m sorry to say it’s true in my life. I don’t know my neighbors as well as I should. It is partly because I’m an introvert, and initiating conversations with people is not the easiest thing in the world for me. But it is also partly because I don’t make getting to know my neighbors a priority. Somehow I think the Lord wants this to change in my life.

How about you? Does it need to change in your life, too? Love for one another, for those who are different from us, and for our neighbors, whoever and wherever they are, is a continuing debt we owe.

### **THE DANGER OF DEBT**

Debt, you know, can be a dangerous thing. It is not always a bad thing. The fact is that we are eternally indebted to God for all that He has done for us. There is no way you and I can ever repay God for His goodness and love to us. I will be indebted to Mary Sue as long as we live for the fact that, knowing me and my faults as she does, she still loves me as she does. Debts like these are not bad at all. They are evidences of grace. But, on another level, debt is not such a good thing. Way too many Americans are in debt over their heads. Our government is in debt way over its head. The national debt is nearly \$20 trillion, which works out to more than \$60,000 for every U. S. Citizen. The average American’s credit card debt is over \$15,000 (Paul Ausick, 24/7 Wall Street blog, 1-19-16).

A book entitled *History of the World in 100 Objects* by Neil MacGregor chronicles 100 things that have significantly impacted human history, listed in chronological order. It is a pretty strange list. About number 99 on his list, MacGregor writes: “If you were to ask people which 20<sup>th</sup>-century invention had most impact on their daily lives today, instant answers

might be the mobile phone or the PC (or maybe the automobile?). Not many people would think first of the little plastic rectangles that fill (our) wallets and purses. And yet, since they first emerged in the late 1950s, credit cards and their (offspring) have become part of the fabric of modern life. The first general purpose charge card was the Diners Club card, introduced in 1950.” The first bank credit card, the BankAmerica card, appeared in 1958. (MacGregor, *History of the World in 100 Objects*, 647-650.) The rest, as they say, is history.

Speaking of credit cards, you probably won't believe this: A three-year-old girl from Rochester, NY, received an invitation in the mail to apply for a platinum Visa card. As a joke, her mother filled out the application, listing her daughter's occupation as "toddler," and leaving the income line blank. She also wrote on the application: "I'd like to have a credit card to buy some toys, but I'm only three and my mommy says no." The card arrived a few weeks later.

I told you, you wouldn't believe it. Or maybe you do.

The use of credit can be a blessing, if you are disciplined and manage your debt wisely. I don't believe the Bible forbids going into debt under any and all circumstances. I do believe that God expects us to pay off our debts and to do it in a timely fashion. It is a matter of integrity and good stewardship of our resources. Credit is a tool to be used wisely. Make sure you don't abuse it. And make sure you don't become a slave to it.

No matter what debts we assume in the course of our lives, there is one debt, says Paul, that we will never, ever pay off. It is this debt of love we owe to others because of the undeserved and unfailing love we have received (and continue to receive) from God.

### **DO THIS**

Even though we don't have time to look at verses 11-14 in detail, I want you to see that there is a common thread connecting them to verses 8-10. Verses 8-10 are all about our duty and indebtedness to love one another and everyone who qualifies as our neighbor. Verse 11 begins with: "And do this, understanding the present time." Do what? Love one another. Love "the other" who is different from you. Love your neighbor with at least as much love as you have for yourself.

Love for God and others has practical implications for the way we are to live in the particular time in history in which God has placed us here. The Lord willing, we'll talk about it next Sunday. I hope you can be here as the Lord continues to speak to us from His Word.

I don't want to close without highlighting one more quality of the love that is our debt in perpetuity. Paul can say that all the commandments can be summed up in the command to love our neighbors as ourselves, that love does no harm or wrong to our neighbor, and therefore, that love is the fulfillment of the law (13:9-10). Love fulfills the law because it does not violate any of the other commandments. Love does not commit adultery; it is not unfaithful to one's husband or wife. Love does not unlawfully take the life of another person. Love does not steal or covet what belongs to another person. Love does not spread lies or

gossip about another person. *Agape* love – the love God has for us, the kind of love that is the primary fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22) – does no wrong to our neighbor. It always seeks what is in the best interest of the one who is loved.

If you have paid off your home mortgage, I commend you and salute you. If you have paid off your vehicle(s), I salute you. If you pay off your credit card balance every month and live within your means without going into debt, I salute you. But there is one debt none of us will ever fully repay in this life: Our continuing debt to love one another, because of the love with which God loves us.

This kind of love is what the world needs now. And “it’s the only thing that there’s just too little of.” There is never a time when it is not time to love others with the love God has shown us. It has never been more needed in the world than today. May it be the defining quality in all our relationships – in our marriages and families and friendships, in the church, in our neighborhoods, and wherever we go. May we be people who consistently incarnate the love of Jesus, and so make a difference in a broken, hurting world.

Lord, let it be so in us, to the glory of Your name. Amen.