

Sermon Growth Guide

Author: Rev. Dr. Eunice McGarrah



THE RULE OF LOVE | Romans 13:8-14

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Key Verse: Romans 13:12 - "The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light."

Big Idea: The chief ethic of the Christian life is a sacrificial love that puts God and the neighbor first.

Foundations

As we continue our study of Romans, we have been considering what Paul means when he writes that we are "to present our bodies as a living sacrifice." So, beyond that command in Romans 12:1, Paul begins to tell us the ways in which we tangibly "present our bodies" in view of the love that has been showered upon us unconditionally. And Paul, always fond of lists, overflows with the lists of attitudes and actions that mark the Christian and the Christian community. To the unbelieving world, many of these virtues seem silly, some seem dangerous. A life that includes love for one's enemies, that values humility over arrogant pride is deemed weak.

Romans 13:8-14 is divided into two sections: (1) Living with love for one another and (2) living as children of light rather than darkness. Verses 8-10 are relational and verses 11-13 are moral. Acts of love for the neighbor are fulfilling the Law. Love does no wrong to the neighbor, but Paul raises the trajectory of love. Love does not only refrain from doing evil to the neighbor. Love goes beyond and seeks the good of the neighbor. This is how one fulfills the Law. Love is not some squishy emotion that knocks on the door of your heart. It is real time action that contributes to your neighbor's flourishing. And Paul senses an urgency to fulfill the Rule of Love and urges us to wake up and live like citizens of the Kingdom right now.

Understanding God's Word

Pastor Tim, in his sermon, is careful to make a distinction between the world's understanding of love and Christ's example of love. We have to be careful, he says, to not assume that the loving thing to do is letting others do what may feel good to them but which is, in fact, harmful. Deeds of darkness do regularly masquerade as deeds of light.

What do you think are the effects or results of this distinction between the deeds of darkness and the armor of light?

Applying God's Word

Our son was wearing his Citadel uniform when someone said to him, "I like the costume you're wearing." His response: you wear a costume when you're pretending. When you wear a uniform you act according to what the uniform stands for and you become what you wear." What specific things or practices do you think are involved in "Putting on the armor of light?"

Witnessing God's Word

Are there areas in your neighborhood or at work where you regularly encounter "deeds of darkness?" How might you shine as you wear the armor of light?

**Portions of this guide also appear in a blog posted by Pastor McGarrah at: thepastorsworkshop.com*

The rule of love. Love rules. That's what we are talking about today. Everything we do in the Christian life must be organized and arranged under the Rule of Love. We always ask, Does this accord with the rule of love? That doesn't mean anything goes. Love needs to be guided by the Word. So doing everything for love doesn't mean you will do anything. See where I'm going? One could and should say, in the immortal words of Meatloaf, "I would do anything for love; but I won't do that." We are studying Romans 13-15 under this heading, Life Together. In our life together as believers and in our life together in the world, every action we take, every decision, every measure of right and wrong must be ordered under the rule of love. Love is the defining measure of Christian ethics. The rule of love.

But what does love mean? Love has many meanings. English has one word covering all kinds of different ideas. You might say you love your parents. You might say you love skiing. You might say you love your country. You might say you love your wife. Someone says, "I'm going out for a burrito. Want one?" You say, "Love it!" Love makes us picture a candlelight meal, violins and flowers, and warm, gushy sentiments. The Bible uses different words for different loves, but the main distinction is direction. Some love is love that desires, draws in, takes, consumes. Some love is love that gives, flows outward, sacrifices, and builds up. There is love that takes and love that makes. Did you have a doll as a kid? Be honest. I had three, and blanky. My mom put them in a shoebox when I grew up. When I was home from college I pulled them out, stained and threadbare and tired. I'm not even sure what one of them was. It was like a grotesque amalgam of Tigger and Piglet or something. But there was a day when that little whatever meant the whole world to me. If the house was on fire, that's what I would grab. It wasn't worthy of that much love, but I loved it into that much value. My child's heart's love made it worth a thousand dollars in my eyes. Love that builds. "Self-centered love loves the other for the sake of itself; spiritual love loves the other for the sake of Christ." --Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Self-centered love consumes;

spiritual love builds up, edifies. That is what we are called to practice in our life together. And it isn't just feelings; it is action.

"Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law." (Romans 13:8) Last week we learned why we pay taxes. A lot of you were wondering. We owe. Christians pay taxes because the government is an instrument of God bringing order to society, curbing evil, rewarding good and fixing potholes. Render what is due. Don't carry a debt, except—we pick up here—except for the debt of love. If you are going to keep a debt, keep the debt of love. Owe love. Love is something we owe one another, and it will never be fully paid up. Really? How's that? This is an outpouring, selfless love. The more you pour out, the more you pour out. The more you love, the more you love. You don't satisfy the note, a last car payment. Let this debt remain.

The Ten Commandments are about love; did you know that? They're split into two groups, the first four are about love for God and the second six are about love for neighbor, love for one another. They are the vertical and the horizontal directions of love. "The commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery,' 'You shall not murder,' 'You shall not steal,' 'You shall not covet,' and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" (Romans 13:9) These negative commands, don't do this, don't do that, are translated into a positive call: love your neighbor. Paul is familiar with what Jesus taught. "Jesus replied: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." (Matthew 22:37-40) This is that building up love. Love your neighbor as yourself. Give as much attention to serving the needs of your neighbor as you give to serving your own needs. Yes, if you did that, there is no way you would break these

commands. There is no way you would sleep with someone else's spouse, take someone's life, steal someone's property. All that becomes impossible. You love them. "Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law." (Romans 13:10) We owe a debt of love. Keep paying, but don't stop owing.

Then, anticipating maybe the need for some motivation here, Paul says this: "And do this, understanding the present time: The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed." (Romans 13:11) Do this with full understanding that the time is short. There must be urgency here. Acts of love are best done now, not put off. Not scheduled for a later, more convenient moment. Now. This is the hour. This is the time. This is the pregnant moment, and we don't know how many more moments there are or how many more we will have. I'm 52 now. A lot of you are older than that. We attend a lot of memorial services together, don't we? I was with a friend at one recently and I said, "Tough, isn't it?" He said, in good Christian spirit, "Yeah, but not for him! He's with Jesus. It's hard for us." "Yeah, it's hard to miss him." "No," he said, "It's hard to wonder which one of us is next in the box!"

Here's the deal, it doesn't matter how old you are, there is urgency to stay awake to the call to love. Wake up! We don't know when the last day is. People try to calculate it or predict it. From the Middle Ages on people have predicted dates, and devout followers have stopped working, spent their money, wound up destitute. We don't know when the end comes, but we know it is coming and we know we are meant to live our lives expectant and ready. On our toes. The church fathers called it the Eighth Day. We live stuck in seven day weeks, but one day there will be the Eighth Day. "It is this day which the Psalmist called 'the eighth,' because it is outside this time of weeks. Whether you call it a day or an age, it expresses the same idea... It is the day

that never ends, the day that knows no evening, the day that has no tomorrow, the day that never passes away into another age." –Basil of Caesarea Because there was a third day we know there will be an eighth day, but we don't know when it is. Paul says, as we can say, we do know this: each day it is one day closer. Wake up! "The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light." (Romans 13:12) As my dad used to say, "Quit farting around!" That's not in the Bible. I think it should be.

This is like being out camping and you wake up a little before dawn. It's still dark, but the day is coming. Dress for the day, it says. Put on the clothes for the day. "Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy." (Romans 13:13) These things have an intoxicating effect. They make you sleepy, spiritually drowsy. Before you know it, you are head bobbing on the highway of life. Wake up. Dress for the day. Put on the "armor of light." That drowsy dope is not who you are meant to be. You were made for the day. Paul wrote to another church, "You are all children of the light and children of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be awake and sober. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet." (1 Thessalonians 5:5-8) Wake up. Armor up. Dress for the day. That is actually who you are. You are made for the day. You belong to the light. Man it feels good when you start to live into who God made you to be. Put down the video games. Drop the infinite scrolling. Turn away from the extra margaritas. Turn in the empty, time-sucking habits you have convinced yourself you deserve that leave you wondering if you have just wasted your life. Turn to the debt of love. The rule of love. Where can I love? Not as a sentiment, but as an act of love.

I just heard the testimony on a podcast of a man named Jonathan Almonte. He works for Compassion International in the DR. He was a Compassion kid. He was born to a single mom.

They were very poor. His father did not give him his name for five years, so he had no birth certificate. That's how it worked. He saw his father once a month for five minutes. A friend connected him to Compassion and a woman named Jamie in Michigan started sending him letters. He started feeling the love of God through the church where all this was happening. When Jonathan was fourteen, his father said, "We are having a meeting." He sat Jonathan down and said, "You were a mistake. We will not have any relationship from now on. You are not part of my family. You should have been aborted." And he left. Jonathan was crushed. He doubted God. He doubted life. He was in despair. A letter came from Jamie. As he told his testimony, he recited the letter by heart: "Greetings, Jonathan from Michigan. We've received a fair dusting of snow today on Thanksgiving. Today is a great day to reflect on all the things that I am thankful for. And you are one of those that I am greatly thankful for. It is because of Jesus' birth that we can have hope and assurance of eternal life after death. 'Today, in the town of David, a savior has been born to you. He is Christ the Lord.' Luke 2:11. In Christ's love, Jamie." He said, "Getting that letter saved my life. Somehow there is a God who sees me and cares about me. Somehow God connected me with a woman thousands of miles away who says I am a cause for thanksgiving for her. I didn't even know what Thanksgiving was!" he said. But she valued me. God valued me.

See, here's the thing. I think about Jamie. Was that a big deal, writing that note? But it was an act of love. Not a sentiment. Not misty cloud of warm feelings. An act of love. One act of love carries the weight of a thousand good feelings. An act of love God used to build up a boy and pull him back from the brink of despair. An act of love that was multiplied in Christ's hands to create a man in Jonathan who now spreads the love of Christ to hundreds of kids. An act of love. Put on this armor of light. Put

aside deeds of darkness. Do love. Do the rule of love.

How do I get there? It's not a program. This putting off of darkness and putting on of light, it isn't a program or plan I can prescribe. It comes down to this. It comes down to being in Christ. It comes down to belonging to Christ. Don't wear the clothes of the night. You can't honor the rule of love with those clothes on. Put on the armor of light. Put on Jesus. "Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh." (Romans 13:14) Have you clothed yourself in Jesus? Have you put off your other stuff and asked him to be your armor of light, your daytime clothes, your true self, your life, your light, your Savior?