

Mark 12:28-34

Romans 13:8-14

September 10, 2017

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

IT IS ENOUGH

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

The sanctuary was packed full of excited people as their new pastor began her ministry. She had everyone's full attention as she preached one of the finest sermons they had ever heard. The members of the Pastor Nominating Committee were justifiably feeling proud as members of the congregation congratulated them on making such a fine choice.

There were even more people in the pews the next Sunday. Church members had invited their friends and neighbors to hear their new pastor. When she began to preach the same sermon as the week before, some people looked at each other and mouthed the words, "What's going on?" After the service, members of the Pastor Nominating Committee huddled in the narthex and talked. It was unusual to hear the same sermon two weeks in a row, but their new pastor had been busy getting settled, there were plenty of first-timers in worship that morning, and, after all, it was a very fine sermon.

They had to bring in extra chairs on the third Sunday. The word was out about the new preacher. To be honest, some people were intrigued that she had preached the same sermon two weeks in a row. They came just to see what she would do. Sure enough, the pastor preached the same sermon again. This time, the elders of the church approached the chairperson of the Pastor Nominating Committee and wanted to know what was going on. He could only shrug his shoulders and say, "Let's don't cause any problems. Look at all of the people who are here today!" So the elders let it go.

Wouldn't you know it? She preached the same sermon on her fourth Sunday in the pulpit! That did it. As she was taking off her robe in her study, the clerk of session and the chairperson of the Pastor Nominating Committee came in and said, "We need to know what's going on. When you preached the same sermon the second Sunday, we cut you some slack. When you preached it a third time, we didn't want to make any trouble. Besides, there were lots of people in worship last week. But today you preached the same sermon for the fourth time in a row. Don't you have any other sermons to preach?" The new pastor looked at them and said, "Of course I do." They said, "Well, when are you going to start preaching them?" The pastor looked at them and said, "When you start living out this sermon, I'll go on to my next one."

Maybe you're starting to feel like that clerk of session and chairperson of the Pastor Nominating Committee, hearing similar scripture readings and sermons now three weeks in a row: "Don't you have any other sermons to preach?" Late Wednesday afternoon I sent Cheryl worship information for today's bulletin, then left the church. As I was walking into Food Lion a few minutes later, Cheryl called me and asked, "Do you

realize the gospel lesson is the same as last week?” I said, “Yep, I sure do,” and she said, “Okay, just checking.” In fact, it’s the same gospel lesson for the third week in a row — Mark 12:28-34, about The Great Commandment, love God/love neighbor. Actually, I’ve started wondering if maybe we shouldn’t read that gospel lesson every Sunday, so that we’re always reminded of what is most important.

St. Jerome was a late 4th century A.D. priest, theologian, and historian from northern Italy. Second only to St. Augustine of the same time period, Jerome was a prolific Christian writer who translated most of the Bible into Latin. He was known for his writings on Christian morals and how to live as a Christian, especially in large urban centers such as Rome.

In Jerome’s commentary on Paul’s letter to the Galatians, he wrote about Galatians 6:10, which says, “So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.” He told this story about the Apostle John: “When the blessed evangelist John, the apostle, had lived in Ephesus into his extreme old age and could hardly be carried to the meetings of the church by the disciples, and when in speaking he could no longer put together many words, he would not say anything else in the meetings but this: ‘Little children, love one another!’ When at last the disciples and brothers present got tired of hearing the same thing again and again, they said, ‘Master, why do you keep saying the same thing?’ John replied with a saying worthy of him: ‘Because it is the Lord’s command, and it is enough if it is really done.’”¹

If you’re getting tired of hearing the same thing again and again and are tempted to ask me, “Dr. Phil, why do you keep saying the same thing?” I suppose I would give you the apostle John’s answer, “Because it is the Lord’s command, and it is enough if it is really done.”

“It is enough if it is really done . . .”

“It is enough . . .”

“If it is really done . . .” Once again, we’re back to trying to figure out how to live the way the Lord commands us to live and the apostle Paul instructs us to live as people who have been saved from sin and redeemed for new life in Christ. Last Sunday we heard a long list of ethical instructions from Paul which have been described as the “marks of the true Christian.” Today we hear some more of Paul’s ethical exhortations about what it means to live as redeemed people who have been freed to live for God and for neighbor:

- * Owe no one anything.
- * Love one another.
- * Love your neighbor as yourself.
- * Love does no wrong to a neighbor.
- * Love is the fulfilling of the law.
- * Lay aside the works of darkness, put on the armor of light.
- * Live honorably as in the day.
- * Put on the Lord Jesus Christ.
- * Make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

I'm tempted to write the Chase Bank Mortgage Company (that services our mortgage) and the Great Lakes Higher Education Corporation (that services our outstanding student loans) and say, "To Whom It May Concern: I no longer want to owe you anything, so I will not be sending any more payments. But, I love you! Romans 13:8. Sincerely, Philip Gladden." Dr. Dan said I would probably get the following letter in response: "Dear Philip Gladden, Thank you for your recent letter. See you in court!"

How realistic is Jesus' command that we love one another? How practical are Paul's ethical instructions about our new life in Christ? When we hear the Great Commandment to love God/love neighbor, or Paul's instructions from last week and today, we might have the same reaction as many people do when they hear Jesus' Sermon on the Mount — "Well, that sounds nice, and it would be nice if life could be that way, but it's just not realistic or practical. That's not the way the world operates."

Maybe that's exactly the point! Maybe that's what Paul means when he describes the new life in Christ, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God — what is good and acceptable and perfect." Maybe Jesus and Paul **really mean what they say** — if we claim to be followers of Jesus Christ, we will fulfill the law by loving God and our neighbors.

Many people like to use Eugene Peterson's version of the Bible called *The Message* because it presents God's Word in down-to-earth, easy-to-relate-to language. Here's how he translates Romans 13:8-10:

"Don't run up debts, except for the huge debt of love you owe each other. When you love others, you complete what the law has been after all along. The law code—don't sleep with another person's spouse, don't take someone's life, don't take what isn't yours, don't always be wanting what you don't have, and any other 'don't' you can think of—finally adds up to this: Love other people as well as you do yourself. You can't go wrong when you love others. When you add up everything in the law code, the sum total is *love*."

It's interesting how God's math works. When you add up all of the negatives (any "don't" you can think of), you end up with the most positive of all — the sum total of love! It's how our "got to's" get turned into "get to's." Here's how the apostle Paul sums it up in his letter to the Galatians, which has been called the Christian's Declaration of Independence: "For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" (Galatians 5:13-14)

You really don't need me or any other preacher to tell you how hard it is to love God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind, and to love your neighbor as yourself. It's all that easy and it's all that hard! Jesus knew that. Paul knew that. That's why they didn't leave it up to us to do on our own. "Instead," Paul says, "put on the Lord Jesus Christ. Wake up! Lay aside the works of darkness. Live honorably as in the

day.” God’s future makes a difference in our present lives. We don’t live and love just to get into heaven some day. We live and love now, today, because that is the way of God’s people. Countercultural? Yes! Unpopular? Sometimes! Easy to do? Not at all! But that **agape** love seems to be the defining characteristic of people who truly love God and neighbor — “and they’ll know we are Christians by our love.”

In the aftermath of 9/11 sixteen years ago, people across this nation came together in an impressive display of unity. Churches were full. Streets were lined with American flags. Differences were set aside as neighbor reached out to neighbor.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey, we have seen picture after picture of neighbor helping neighbor. FaceBook has been full of memes talking about how the storm didn’t discriminate among people when it hit — and the pictures coming out of Houston and other devastated areas have shown that first responders, rescue personnel, and neighbors didn’t either.

As we wait to see what Hurricane Irma will do to us here in southeastern North Carolina, we anticipate how we might be called upon to help our neighbors, or to be helped by our neighbors.

It’s wonderful that most people respond this way when tragedy strikes. But it makes you wonder why we don’t or can’t or won’t live like this all of the time. Maybe it’s just too hard. Maybe it makes us too uncomfortable. Maybe we just get too caught up in our own bubbles and forget about the other folks. Maybe it’s just more comfortable to love the people right around us. Maybe we don’t really wish ill will upon other folks, but we never really get around to doing anything proactively.

I don’t know about you, but Jesus’ command to love God/love neighbor, and Paul’s ethical instructions about the Christian life really make me think about my own life and faith. Oh, it’s tempting to feel guilty, but I don’t think either Jesus or Paul intended to send us on a guilt trip. Quite the opposite — I think they both were proclaiming the good news that because of God’s love and grace in Jesus Christ, we now have the exciting, wonderful, challenging, all-that-easy/all-that-hard opportunity to live in a whole new way in relation to our God and our neighbor.

Before I left the house Thursday morning to go to the church and write this sermon, I looked at FaceBook and saw something my big sister, Susan, had re-posted. It’s about the pastor and the church. It might make you uncomfortable. You might not agree with everything it says. Then again, you might welcome the message. It certainly got my attention. It didn’t come with a title, but I think there are two definite title possibilities: “It Is Enough” or “It’s All That Easy and It’s All That Hard.”

“The pastor says they sit front and center. The gay boys. Sometimes they hold hands. And some folks have said he should address the issue. But the pastor tells me he doesn’t know what to say. And then there’s the man who sneaks in the back door. Fresh

off the street. After the service starts. And leaves before altar call. The people sitting close complain about how bad he smells. Of beer and smoke and sweat. But the pastor tells me he doesn't know what to say. And then there's the young mama who wears dirty skin and lets her four children come in and eat all the donuts and drink all the watered-down juice. Some church staff say they '...eat like little pigs. Like they haven't eaten in weeks.' While the mama just stands there and lets them. And the elders say something must be done and said. But the pastor tells me he doesn't know what to say. And there's the whore sitting among the faithful. And everybody knows her. She sits with a painted-up face, cheap perfume, and a broken heart. And those who sit close, well, they all treat her for what they think she is. And at the last staff meeting, her name came up. Something must be done about her. But the pastor tells me he doesn't know what to say.

The pastor is a good man. Holy and just. And he wants to do the 'right and loving' thing. And he wants to 'look like Jesus.' And he asks me if I have any thoughts on anything he could say.

Yes, sweet Pastor. I do.

Start with this and say it louder than any other words:

'Welcome to Church. This is a place of love and hope and safety and forgiveness. We will be food for the hungry. Living water for the thirsty. We are so glad you are here. You are invited. You are loved. Come on in—we've been waiting on you. Welcome here. We are the church.'

Say that. To the called and to the called-out. To the leaders and the greeters. To the dirty and the clean. We are all the same. We are.

May we blow the dust of religion out of our souls and choose affection instead. May our words and actions and reactions be a sanctuary for all.

Jesus broke many laws to love. So, Jesus, be our voice. Be the only words we should ever speak."

Let us pray: God, help us see the world as you see it. Help us fully offer our hearts, minds, souls, and strength to you. Make our love for our neighbor look like the love you share among the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

NOTES

¹See Dr. Ralph F. Wilson, "Stories about John from the Church Fathers," at www.jesuswalk.com for an account of this story in Jerome's commentary. Wilson cites John R. W. Stott, *The Epistles of John* (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, Eerdmans, 1964), p. 49.