

Carole and I once traveled outside the country for a couple of weeks in autumn. When we got home, I realized that I had missed the World Series. I had not thought about the World Series while we were away. How could I forget, just forget, altogether forget an event that had given me pleasure and meaning for decades?

That memory came back as I read recently about St. Benedict, the founder of Western monasticism in Europe. Listen to this. “St. Benedict went into the caves of Subiaco (Italy) as a young man, not because the affairs of men and the realities of everyday life aren’t capable of sanctification, but to break the spell that leads us to imagine them supreme.” (“The Public Square,” R. R. Reno, *First Things*, November 2012, 3-4)

That’s what happened to the World Series. Being outside the country among people who knew nothing and said nothing about baseball broke the spell that baseball had cast on me since I was a child. To my surprise the world seemed more spacious.

Here’s why my experience is relevant. “A sick society must think much about politics, as a sick man must think much about his” health. (C. S. Lewis, “Membership,” *The Weight of Glory*, 32) And as with some people who suffer greatly, our political illness has led to abuse. The abuse consisted in persistent, insistent, political advertising that beguiled us into thinking that nothing in the world matters more than politics. It is a lie.

This is a sermon about breaking spells. **Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things**, wrote the apostle. – Colossians 3:2. Not incessantly but strategically. So, for a few shining moments, let’s set our minds on news from our true homeland, and the spell of political propaganda will begin to loosen its hold on our abused, immortal souls.

The Gift of Law

Romans 13:8: **Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another.** The words **love** and **debt** leap off the page. “What the world needs now is love, sweet love. It’s the only thing there’s just too little of.” But putting **love** and **debt** together doesn’t feel right. Loving someone doesn’t feel like paying a debt. Of course it doesn’t. Later, I’ll show you why it’s a good choice of words.

Another powerful word leaps off the page at the end of verse 8. **Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellow man has fulfilled the law.** Paul told us what law he had in mind in verses 9-10. **The commandments**, the really big ones, **“Do not commit adultery,” “Do not murder,” “Do not steal,” “Do not covet,” and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no harm to its neighbor.**

Then, the apostle said this: **Therefore, love is the fulfillment of the law.** That is astonishing. Obedience is the fulfillment of the law, isn’t it? If the law says, “Don’t steal,” and I don’t steal, that satisfies the law’s demands. I have obeyed the law, and your property is safe, end of story. But it’s not the end of the story. God’s revelation invites us to look more closely. Law, even when obeyed, is not complete. To be complete law needs love. How can that be? What does love add to law?

To answer that question we have to think about the nature of law. “Thou shalt not steal,” says the law. I need your help here. Who has a smart phone that I could borrow? Would you place it beside you, and while you are looking away, I will “steal” it.

Why is my theft wrong? Does the smart phone object to being in my possession? Of course not! It will function just as well for me as it did for (George). I brought a

hammer with me this morning. Will I inflict pain on George's phone, when I smash it with my hammer? Of course not! Well, what makes it wrong for me to take George's phone and even smash it?

The only answer that makes sense is personal. The phone belongs to George. Stealing the phone doesn't do anything to the phone, but it does something to the person who owns the phone.

For example, if I take George's phone at gunpoint, I threaten him and frighten him. It will also be hard for George to trust me with his other possessions. He also has to buy a new phone, an additional expense he didn't want to have. If he had personal identity information on his phone, he would have to change PIN numbers and maybe account numbers. I may create problems for him with his insurance company.

All those consequences are intensely personal. Stealing damages relationships. We begin to see the nature of law. Law is meant to prevent the breakdown of the relationship between George and me. If George were a complete stranger, the law is meant to keep open the possibility of a good relationship between us. Law is so serious about this that they will put me in jail if I steal. Law uses force. It has to, because there is a streak of lawlessness in each of us that threatens social chaos unless lawful force restrains it. If you apply that meaning to 300 million people, you begin to appreciate the rule of law in national life. It prevents chaos.

Yet the Word of God says law needs love to be complete. Law is incomplete because it cannot take human relationships to the next level. Law can bring order to human relationships; it cannot bring affection and loyalty and sacrifice. Law keeps life from descending into chaos; it cannot make life worth living. Law and the keeping of the law are not enough for human flourishing.

Love is the fulfillment of the law.

That brings us back to the central question. What does love add to law? To answer that question we have to think about the nature of love.

We call love, greed, fear, anger, hope, and the like emotions. Older theologians called them movements of the will. Movements of the will lead to movements of the body. For example, if I come up behind George and steal his phone, that is a movement of my body. But there is a prior movement of my will that caused me to steal his phone. What movement in my will would cause me to do that?

It might be greed. I just want a phone like his, and I don't want to buy it. So I steal his. The movement of my will might be fear. I'm afraid of what will happen to my child, if I can't buy medicine for her illness. I don't have the money, so I steal his phone to sell it to get money to buy medicine for my child.

Love is a movement of your will. What has that movement in your will caused you to do recently for someone else? I took my granddaughters to swing and slide at the park. I took to heart my wife's counsel about a difficult issue. I kept my promise to a friend. Love is the movement of your will that desires and, if possible, does what is best for the other person, regardless of who the person is.

Now, we can put together the nature of law and the nature of love. Law keeps life from descending into chaos. Doing what is best for the other person, regardless of who the person, makes life worth living. It fills the social order that law creates with meaning. That's how love completes what law began.

Two Implications

That understanding of love and law has two implications. First, love does not do away with moral law. I once had lunch with a man, who was leaving his wife for another woman. I could not shake him from the conviction that he was doing the right thing. “I no longer love my wife. You don’t know what kind of woman she is. I love this other woman, and I believe God wants me to leave my wife and marry her.”

In his logic love justified breaking the vows he made before God to his wife on their wedding day. Love justified his being ungrateful to the woman who had borne their children and made a home for them and provided him companionship for many years. He was saying that love overrides the moral law that says, “Do not divorce,” That is not what the Word of God means when it says that love fulfills the law.

How often have you heard people say this in recent years? “If two men with same-sex attraction want to marry, and they genuinely love each other, how can you deny them love because the Bible forbids such a relationship?” In that logic love overrides the moral law that says homosexual behavior and marriage are wrong.

Here is a relevant parallel. Suppose that Wall Street bankers, who made billions on sub-prime mortgages and plunged much of the world into recession, did that because they just loved making money. Does their love for making money override the moral law that says greed is wrong? Does love for making money justify what they did?

Romans 13 says that love is the fulfillment of the law. It’s not the breaking, ignoring, dispensing with, or overriding the law. We who believe the Word of God must say that firmly and kindly. We should also say kindly and firmly that ignoring or overriding God’s laws about human sexuality will sooner or later damage human lives on a large scale the way greed on Wall Street has damaged people on a large scale.

Our new understanding of love and law has a second implication. Love is not liking. That’s why love is sometimes a debt to be paid. The Lord’s command in the Sermon on the Mount brings this out clearly: “**Love your enemies.**” – Matthew 5:44. Enemies are people you don’t like. But Jesus said we are to desire and, where possible, do what is best for the other person, including our enemy.

If loving your enemies meant liking your enemies, then Christian love would require you to dredge up happy emotions toward people you don’t like. The good news is that when God commands you to love your enemies, He doesn’t command you to like your enemies. He just commands you to love them.

We saw an example of how that might work in Romans 12:20. **If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.** You don’t have to like him; just feed him. That’s the good thing she needs that you can do for her.

The apostle promised us in Romans 12:2 that we who follow Christ can hope to be transformed by the renovation of our minds. Our minds need renovation; we have been bewitched by the idea that love has to feel a certain way, or it isn’t love, that feeling good matters more than doing good.

How to Love Like That

I hope that deep down in your soul you have been asking for the last 15 minutes, “How do I love like that?” The short answer is: you love like that, because someone loved you like that. The Bible says: **This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers – 1**

John 3:16. In a nutshell: **we love because he first loved us** – 1 John 4:19.

That brings us back to the headwaters of Roman 12-15. Romans 12:1: **I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy.** The letter to the Romans tells the story of God’s mercy to man. **God demonstrates his love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.** – Romans 5:8. Romans 5:10: **When we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son. He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?** – Romans 8:32. That is the gospel, and the gospel is God’s way of extending mercy to ever-widening circles of humanity.

Has the mercy of God washed up on your soul like a gentle wave on a sandy beach? Or is this message of the mercy of God just so much religious jabberwocky in your ears? Has it never reached the core of your being that if God is not merciful to us, we are doomed as a species?

If you have any sense that the mercy of God is meant for you, and you have never responded to God, why don’t you at least say to Him with all the sincerity you can muster, “Thank you? Thank you for doing what was best for me when I was your enemy and couldn’t care less about you. Thank you for Jesus Christ.”

If you have any sense that the mercy of God is meant for you; if you have any hunger to say thank you to Him in some deep way; if any stirring of devotion, any desire to please Him, then **offer your bodies to God as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual worship.**

As one who leads the way, I say to you, “Offer your body to God as a living sacrifice. Reaffirm the offer of your body to God as a living sacrifice. Don’t be afraid of failure or hypocrisy. Be afraid only of being so mired in the mundane that you no longer lift up your eyes to the horizon and aspire to be what God calls you to be.”

The only thing left to do is pray – two prayers for us who are prepared to pray. “Thank you, heavenly Father, for Jesus who showed me your mercy.” “Lord, take my body, and let it be consecrated to you everywhere my body goes.”

(After prayer:) Next Sunday is the next to last sermon in this short series of sermons, but next Sunday will also be a climax. I will ask you who have offered or renewed the offer of your bodies as living sacrifices to God – I will ask you to say so in a material way. I won’t embarrass anyone. But if you are ready I will ask you to fill out a card *without your name* on it that says you have offered your body to God as a living sacrifice, and we will post it in designated places for all to see.