

Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law. ⁹ 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.” ¹⁰ Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.

¹¹ 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. 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. ¹³ Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. ¹⁴ Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh. (Romans 13:8-14 NIV2011)

You Are What You Wear

To a certain point, the clothes we wear have an effect on us. They can make us feel more confident and professional while others make us feel comfortable and ready to relax. While the opposite is also true: certain clothes make us feel self-conscious and uncomfortable. At the same time, our clothes don't only have an effect on you. It's a statement to other people. We know we shouldn't be judgmental or jump to conclusions. At the same time—not condoning or excusing any sinful actions—that's what happens. We know this. So you dress up for an interview because you want to be seen as professional and put together. The football players wear their jerseys on game day to show they are part of the team. You put on your work clothes because that's what you are going to do. You are what you wear. There's a statement you are making by what you wear. It's not just about you. Never is. Then again, we aren't just talking about shirts and pants.

As Paul closes out his letter to the church in Rome he says: “**Let no debt remain outstanding**” (v.8). Paul isn't giving financial advice. What Paul is saying is that you are under no moral or social obligations to anyone. You don't owe anyone anything, except to **love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. 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.” ¹⁰ Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law” (v.8-10).**

We've been set free not to do whatever we want. We've been set free not so that no one can tell us what to do. We've been set free for loving our neighbor. It's really this simple. This is how we are to live as God's people. This is the “Golden Rule” that even people who do not know God agree this is good for life. Very few people are going to really argue against this. You don't want to be murdered. You don't want someone to hurt you. You don't want your spouse to cheat on you. You don't want your stuff wrongfully taken from you. Therefore, don't do that to other people. Love your neighbor as yourself.

God's law really is that simple. We don't need to keep track of a bunch of different rules. We really don't have many commands. It's simply as Jesus said in Mark 12, love God above all things and love your neighbor as yourself. This isn't a feeling that overcomes us. This love is action; you chose to do this. Loving your neighbor is more than following a set of rules. It's your attitude towards them. It's more than doing a good deed for the day. It's continually putting them before yourself. It's building up, not tearing down. It's being patient and slow-to-anger. It's not about letting them do whatever they want. You love them so you will tell them when they are going down a dangerous path.

Love your neighbor, that is, love the person living next door to you along with the stranger ahead of you taking their dear sweet time at the store. Love your children and spouse along with other people's children and spouses. Your neighbor might "like" your post on Facebook. They also are the ones who have a far different opinion and disagree with you. Your neighbor might share your political viewpoints. She might also come from a different world-view and political platform. Your neighbor is the one who you think isn't working hard enough. Your neighbor is the one whose personal decisions have wrecked their own lives. Your neighbor sometimes feels unlovable when she said something that rubbed you the wrong way. Your neighbor is someone who hasn't loved you back but hurt someone who is near and dear to you. You owe them nothing else, except to continually love them. That is, you chose to do this. Love them without strings attached or hidden contract fees. Love them knowing that it's going to cost you something. Love them putting their needs, their time before your own. Love them by defending them when they are not around. Loving them means putting your own opinion to the side to actually listen. This is love despite the fact she doesn't deserve it. This is love in spite of what they have or have not done. It does not keep record of wrongs done. Love your neighbor.

Sometimes we do. More often we love when it's convenient. We love once they live up to our expectations of what they should be doing, living, wearing, acting. We love them as long as they don't hurt us or other people we care about. We carefully guard our love, not wanting to give too much lest they take advantage of our love. We will love once we have learned to love ourselves. We will love once we are sure that we have enough love for ourselves. Even then our conditional love is so often a transaction of: "I loved you like this so now you need to do that."

We know we should be better. We say that. We know that we have room for improvement. We can see that. We know what we are supposed to do. We just heard it. But then the way we live, talk about other people, and think about them seems to treat this more like a nice suggestion from God. The truth is, this is God's command. This is what you are to do. Not try, do. You shall love your neighbor as yourself! This is God's expectation. Who can possibly do this? Lord, have mercy.

And he does. Your God doesn't love you as you deserve. He gives his love fully and freely. He showed you his love in this way: he gave his one and only Son. Nothing about any one of us made us any more appealing or lovable. And still he chose to love you. While we were still unlovable sinners, Christ died for us. Jesus, true God and man, was born under that Law that weighs on our minds of all the times we have failed to love and fulfill this one command. Jesus loved his neighbor as himself as he leads sinners to repent and forgives their sins. He loves as he welcomes sinners, the losers, the strippers, the cheaters, gives sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, freeing souls from Satan's grasp. We hear his love as he prays for those who crucify him not knowing what they are doing. We see his love as he seeks to take care of his mom when he is gone through his close friend John. He embraces a sinner in love as he assures him, "Today, you will be with me in paradise." We see how wide his love is as he stretches out his arms on that cross. We see how deep his love is that he would sink to the depths of hell to take our place and become a curse for us. We see how high his love is that he sets down his life for us and dies. And because Jesus loves you, he doesn't want you to have any doubt in your mind about his love. So he rises on Easter morning and lives.

For us whose love is so conditional, Jesus tells you, "Don't try and pay me back. You can't. It's a free gift. I love you" For us who so often feel unlovable, Jesus assures you again, "But I do. And nothing can separate you from my love." How can you be sure? See what great love the Father has poured out onto us that we should be called children of God (1 John 3:1). And that is what you are! You were washed with the water and the Word that removes away every stain, wrinkle, and blemish of our selfish love and sin giving you a clean conscience before God. And it's all because Jesus loved you.

And so, we love because he first loved us. We live each day in this baptismal grace knowing we cannot love perfectly, and yet, God continues to love you. Nothing can change that. At the same time, this is still our goal: to love our neighbors as ourselves. This is our desire because Jesus loves me this I know and we want them to know it too. God doesn't need our love to fulfill the Law. Jesus already did. But your neighbor does. This is your meaning and purpose in life. This is why we are here. This is why you have the calling that you do as parent, grandparent, as a single person, as a friend, citizen, rancher, farmer, whatever it might be. Jesus wears you as his mask using your hands and mouth to love your neighbor.

Love your neighbor because: "**The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. ¹² The night is nearly over; the day is almost here**" (v.11-12a). Your salvation was already won at the cross when we hear Jesus cry out, "It is finished." It's already sealed to you when he spoke through his Word, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit," and you rose with Jesus a new creation and child of God. He continues to assure as you receive his body and blood in the bread and wine and hear, "This is for you and the forgiveness of your sins." And where there is forgiveness of sins there is life and salvation. Each day we are one

day closer to when this hope becomes our reality. Each day brings us a little closer to when we will leave this world of tears and see clearly our Redeemer lives. Each day brings us nearer to when Christ will return in triumph and we will be gathered with all of our brothers and sisters who have gone before us. On that day we will be with the Lord forever in body and spirit.

But that day isn't here yet. Until it comes, **“Let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. ¹³ Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy”** (v.12b-13). You are what you wear. Take off those things you do in the shadows and hope that no one finds out. Put to the side those deeds of darkness. If we continue in such sins—wearing those clothes—we are rejecting the forgiveness Jesus freely gives. You are what you wear. So repent and take off those deeds of darkness.

At the same time, this isn't saying that you better get yourself holier lest Jesus comes back and finds you sinning. You cannot eradicate sin from your life. You cannot stop your sinful nature from raising evil desires in your heart. Even if you go live off in the middle of nowhere and cut yourself off from every connection of the world around you, temptation and sin will still be there. The carousing, drunkenness, lack of self-control and discipline, not leaving sex between husband and wife, contention, arguing, trying to prove who's right and who's wrong, jealousy, that's the way of the world. If we wear those clothes—continue in those sins—it puts road blocks in the way of others from knowing Jesus and his love. Why would they want anything to do with what we have to share if we live and act that way? Your actions are not done in a vacuum that only affect you.

You are what you wear, so, **“Clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh”** (v.14). Clothe yourself with the Lord placing your trust in the one who rules over all for your good. Place your hope in Jesus your Savior from sin who loves you. Find your confidence in the God's anointed one, Christ, who fights on your side. Arm yourself with the word of God. Occupy yourself not with thoughts of who needs to be right, who has it better or worse, and theories, but with God's promises and his love he shares in his Word. Return to those baptismal waters and drown that old sinful flesh with daily repentance. Die to sin and rise with Christ as he clothes you in his righteousness and perfection. For all who have been baptized have been clothed with Christ (Galatians 3:27). When you have fallen again, confess your sin, turn from it, and go, your sins are forgiven because Jesus loves you. Go, dear baptized child of God; love your neighbor as Jesus loves you. Amen.