

**Love is the Lesson**  
The First Sunday in Advent  
(From the Epistle: *Romans 13. 8-14*)

*OWE no man any thing, but to love one another: for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law. For this, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Thou shalt not covet; and if there be any other commandment, it is briefly comprehended in this saying, namely, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. Love worketh no ill to his neighbour; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law. And that, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep: for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed. The night is far spent, the day is at hand; let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armour of light. Let us walk honestly, as in the day; not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying. But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof.*

Men have always been reaching after some indefinable thing, an ideal, a sense of purpose and meaning that would somehow tie all of life together.

We look for formulas and search for methods to produce it. We hire experts to think things out, and offer us a way forward. We turn to the eggheads, the professionals, the well-respected to offer us a studied opinion. We read books, we attend seminars, we amass degrees, we acquire certifications. We examine the history of civilizations, looking for some overarching theme that might serve to justify, to accurately sum up the purpose, the reason we exist on this earth. We plunge ourselves into adoration of the arts, in hopes that somehow, some day, we can distill from them a universal truth which will serve to express in some consummate fashion the underlying significance of all human experience.

It seems an endless, and somehow grandly frustrating search. How many thousands have given lifetimes to locate this treasure of treasures that always appears to linger just beyond the grasp? The world weeps over their graves, memorializes them, and declares them martyrs to the cause.

But in today's Epistle, St. Paul generously puts forth the answer, in the most basic of terms. We need look no further, he declares. Had we been willing to accept it, we might have realized this long, long ago. But it is too simple for most. In our vanity we esteemed the endless quest we've undertaken as far superior to whatever might be the actual end of it.

*Owe no man any thing, but to love one another: for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law.*

I saw it restated remarkably on a bumper-sticker one day not long ago: "Life is the school. Love is the lesson". We have been placed here, as it were, to learn nothing less. It is the highest accomplishment of all. There is nothing else beyond it, waiting to be discovered. He who lives by it --regardless of whatever else he has done, whatever other heights he has attained to--

has gone just as far as he ever need go. He is in a position to stamp in huge letters the word “Solved!” on the mystery of man’s purpose.

To love others is to fulfill the law. It turns the awful demand and pressure and insistence and impossibility of the “Thou shalt...!” and the “Thou shalt not...!” into a lifelong duty that, with God’s help, is somehow well within our grasp both to understand and to do our best to practice. If we accept it, and busy ourselves in obeying it, absolutely every situation we encounter in life and relationships will prove instructive toward learning and perfecting it. God expects nothing more, nor nothing less. I cannot ultimately place anything else before Him that will be deemed acceptable. Neither my talents, nor energies, nor ingenuity, nor ceaseless activity, nor any other lofty alternative will do.

It is, however, a vocation in which we are all utter novices, and we will remain so, really, throughout our lives. There may be some who are learning to do well with it, or at least to do better. But the classroom where it is studied and acquired, we must all admit, is no easy place to be. It is often filled with bitter failure, and more often than not we flunk the assignments, and must be given them again and again. The only promotion granted will simply be higher duties toward the end of mastering it, and with them the potential for failure of even greater magnitude. But there is no way out of it, if we are to proceed. As Christians, we must either accept the status quo, or wander on with the rest of the world in pointless self-deception, refusing to submit to the terms established by God Himself for human life, devoting ourselves instead to endless, fruitless substitutions.

Take note of the Apostle’s phrase: *Love worketh no ill to his neighbour; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.* He states the case in the negative, in terms of what we *do not do* to our neighbor. *We work him no ill.* “Well,” I say to myself, “that should be easy! If I am to work him no ill, then the most effective thing I should do is just... keep away from him. The best way to do him no harm is just not to ‘do him’ anything at all!” But what real ill do I cause my neighbor by isolating myself from him? Was I created to live apart from others, and in doing so avoid both doing them ill, and also any duties I may owe them? He is my *neighbor*. I am in association with him, like it or not. Running from him is simply another expression of lovelessness. Love implies proximity to another. Today’s Epistle lists five things we must never do *to* our neighbor. But there a limitless number of things we can and should do *for* him. Turn to the “Love Chapter” --1 Corinthians 13-- if you doubt the enormous debt to others that the task of love imposes upon us.

Our text closes with a remarkable hope, and a powerful exhortation. If in St. Paul’s day, the *night is far spent, the day is at hand*, then how should our times, two thousand years hence, be viewed? If the Apostle counseled his Roman readers: *...now it is high time to awake out of sleep: for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed*, how would he address us? This is

more than mere speculation. It is extremely important, and the implications are immense. If this knowledge served to powerfully compel first century believers to godliness, how indeed does it move us? The topic of appropriate behavior that anticipates the imminent Second Advent of our Lord is more than mere Christmas window-dressing in New Testament Writ. It is persistently and prominently displayed throughout it. But like a person who resets the alarm clock, yawns a few times, and turns over in bed for ten more minutes of delicious slumber, how often does the Church simply... *ignore it?*

Last week we discussed how to prepare for Advent season. But today, we are *there!* “Tempus fugit”. “Time flies”. Or, “Time’s a-wastin’!” as Snuffy Smith used to say. The Bridegroom approaches! Get ready! Be prepared! Watch! Very soon the hour of preparation will be over, and the Great Call will go out to every ear that can hear: “He cometh! *Go ye out to meet Him* (Matt. 25:6)!”

When He comes, what will He find us doing, cries St. Paul? *Wasting away the hours in rioting and drunkenness, in chambering and wantonness, in strife and envying? Or walking honestly, as in the day? Will we be found endeavoring to love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our strength, and with all our mind, and our neighbor as ourself* (Lk. 10:27).

Challenging? Daunting? Impossible? But it is as simple, as easy, as basic, concludes the Apostle, as going to your wardrobe, choosing a new garment, and donning it: *But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof.*

As we make the deliberate decision to “put on” Christ every day, and to put off those things which are the pernicious fruits of our human nature, we ready ourselves in the best possible way not only for each day and the duties of love which will inevitably be imposed upon us, but for that Moment of Moments which should be the deepest underlying passion of our hearts and lives: the Coming of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Let us pray:

*Mercifully hear, O Lord, the prayers of Thy people; that as they rejoice in the Advent of Thine only-begotten Son according to the flesh, so when He cometh a second time in His majesty, they may receive the reward of eternal life; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen*

- (“Ancient Collects & Other Prayers...” p. 18)