

Love Fulfills the Law

September 6, 2026

Romans 13:8-14

Matthew 18:15-20

In his commentary on Galatians, the fourth century theologian Saint Jerome told this story: “The blessed John the Evangelist lived in Ephesus until extreme old age. His disciples could barely carry him to church and he could not muster the voice to speak many words. During individual gatherings he usually said nothing but, ‘Little children, love one another.’** The disciples and brothers in attendance, annoyed because they always heard the same words, finally said, ‘Teacher, why do you always say this?’ He replied with a line worthy of John: ‘Because it is the Lord’s commandment and if it alone is kept, it is sufficient.’**° He said this because of the Apostle’s present mandate: ‘Let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the household of faith.’”

Jerome wrote nearly three hundred years after John wrote the Gospel, so it’s hard to tell whether he’d preserved an authentic memory, or whether he’d preserved a story that reflected the way people thought of John. It certainly honored teachings of Jesus. We honored the “new commandment” Jesus gave at the Last Supper by calling the Thursday of Holy Week “Commandment Thursday” – “Maundy” is an English shortening of the Latin “Mandatum,” which means “commandment.” Jesus also spoke of love as the basis of the “greatest commandments.” As recorded in Mark’s Gospel: “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”

This wasn’t a new idea. The Babylonian Talmud records this story about Hillel the Elder, who lived in the century before Jesus was born:

“It happened again that a certain stranger came before Shammai and said to him: --‘I will become a proselyte providing you teach me the whole Torah while I’m standing on one foot.’

(Shammai) knocked him down with the builder’s rule in his hand.

(The stranger) came before Hillel, who made him a proselyte.

He told him:

--‘What is hateful to you do not do to your neighbor.

That is the whole Torah. The rest is commentary. Go, learn (it)!”

I note that when Paul spoke of love as the fulfillment of the law, he used the negative form that Hillel had, avoiding doing harm. In contrast, Jesus used the positive form, love your neighbor as yourself.

So what is the good of law?

The Apostle Paul had, in fact, spent a good deal of the Letter to the Romans arguing that the Law of Israel had become a problem. When there's a standard, he said, there's not just the risk, there's the likelihood that people won't meet it. And when they don't meet the standard, they've fallen into sin. Without the standard, there would be no transgression.

Paul argued persuasively that the Law had failed to prevent people from sinning – it's an impossible argument to counter. No legal system has ever entirely prevented people from breaking the law. People make unintentional mistakes, such as not noticing that stop sign at the corner. People make uninformed mistakes, such as believing that those entering a traffic circle have the right of way rather than those in it. And people make deliberate decisions to break the law, passing in no-passing zones because they think it will save them time.

Mind you, most people follow traffic laws fully informed and faithfully. Law brings a basic order that's really useful. Law also gets into the specifics of things. Like most of us on this island, I try to "drive with aloha," and I'm glad for all the others who do. If we had no speed limit signs, however, I'd have more difficulty doing it. I wouldn't know, necessarily, whether the road ahead was straight enough for high speeds, or whether around this next curve there is a series of small curves which I may or may not be able to navigate safely.

Not to mention the challenges of a traffic circle. It's one thing to drive one with aloha, but if you're driving with aloha, who goes first?

Despite dismissing the Law as a saving force, Paul definitely believed in offering specific guidance. Nancy Lammers Gross writes at Working Preacher, "In the event we are not clear about what the law of love looks like, even after the gifts for ministry and the disposition of love as described by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount and alluded to in Romans 12, Paul spells out for us what is singularly inappropriate with regard to the law of love as we prepare for the return of Christ: Avoid reveling, which is excessive partying and wild behavior; avoid drunkenness, debauchery, and licentiousness, which may be taken as reckless indulgence in immoral behavior; avoid quarreling and jealousy."

Indeed, Paul's letters are full of lists of things to do and things not to do. If you're looking for guidance in what to do, read Romans, First and Second Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, and so on. Paul happily told people what to do two thousand years ago, and people like me have been happily telling people what to do using his words ever since.

In the end, yes. Paul was right. Love does fulfill the law, at least as long as the law is dedicated to avoiding harm to the neighbor, as long as the law is dedicated to lifting up the neighbor. As

we also know, that's not always the case. Amy Frykolm writes at JourneyWithJesus.net, "When Paul reflects on the second commandment in Romans 13, he writes, "'Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law' (Romans 13:10). But I can imagine [Maria] Skobtsova having a fiery argument with him about this. She would say, 'How can you sell love that short?' She thought of love of neighbor as a 'dangerous thing' that immersed a person in the world and in its suffering, stopping short of nothing. Her life itself was a parable about this commandment and her deeply uncomfortable answer to the question: How do you love your neighbor as yourself?"

Maria Skobtsova was an Orthodox nun who hid Jews from the Nazis in occupied Paris, and died in a gas chamber in 1945.

Love does not just fulfill the law, it goes beyond the law.

Poet Wendell Berry died this week. For decades his work has inspired people of faith, so I'll close with his words:

"I know that I have life
only insofar as I have love.

I have no love
except it come from Thee.

Help me, please, to carry
this candle against the wind."

Amen.

by Eric Anderson