

## **“To Love as God Loves”**

Romans 13:8-14

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**Owe no one 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 any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.**

**Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.**

"Mack's youngest daughter . . . has been abducted during a family vacation . . . evidence that she may have been brutally murdered is found in an abandoned shack deep in the Oregon wilderness. Four years later in the midst of his *Great Sadness*, Mack receives a suspicious note, apparently from God, inviting him back to that shack for a weekend."<sup>1</sup>

So reads the back cover on William Young's best-selling novel, The Shack. While the book is sometimes slow, it's still good read. There are several theological questions explored in the book. The Shack serves up a lot of food for thought.

In one part of the book, Mack struggles with his convictions about what has happened to his daughter. Mack rages against God. He is **utterly convinced** he is right. He knows Missy's murder is a terrible evil; there's no room for discussion. Still, the Holy Spirit, in the form of a willowy woman named Sarayu<sup>2</sup>, forces Mack to rethink things.

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<sup>1</sup> Jacket cover from William Young's novel, The Shack.

<sup>2</sup> The name Sarayu means "wind". The **Sarayu** is an ancient river that flowed through what is now in the modern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. It is often considered to be synonymous with the modern Ghaghara river or as a tributary of it. The name is the feminine derivative of the Sanskrit root *sar* "to flow"; as a masculine stem, *saráyū-* means "air, wind", i.e. "that which is

Sarayu asks Mack, “When something happens to you, how do you determine whether it is good or evil?”

“Well, I haven’t really thought about that. I guess I would say that something is good when I like it---when it makes me feel good or gives me a sense of security. Conversely, I’d call something evil that causes me pain or costs me something I want.”

“Then it is *you* who determines good and evil. You become the judge. And to make things more confusing, that which you determine to be good will change over time and circumstances. And then beyond that and even worse, there are billions of you each determining what is good and what is evil. So when you’re good and evil clashes with your neighbor’s, fights and arguments . . . and even wars break out.”<sup>3</sup>

Does this sound like anything in your life? Does it sound like anything in your world?

*Scripture says, “Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet”; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, “Love your neighbor as yourself.”*

We have trouble with this word “love” because in our culture it is mostly associated with erotic love, or the love of family or friends. But the type of love we usually encounter in scripture is not one of these three (which C. S. Lewis called “eros”, “storge”, and “philia”, from the Greek). And in fact, it is called by a different word in Greek. It is a fourth type of love, *agape*. *Agape* is such a strange concept to us that we don’t even *have* a word that captures it very well in English.

*Agape* is unconditional love directed toward another person. This is often another person we don’t see as very desirable, or loveable. *Agape* is the love that cares for another, regardless of circumstance.

While it’s hard to think of an English word that means *agape*, one word that comes to mind is a rather old-fashioned word, charity. And by this I mean charity in its old-fashioned sense, not its current definition of giving to the poor. I mean---charity as kindness, charity as grace,

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streaming".

<sup>3</sup> p. 134-135, The Shack.

charity as giving the good with no expectation in return. Charity as treating others with respect, behaving with civility, giving others the benefit of the doubt. Charity as blessing. Even blessing the undeserving, even loving those with whom we strongly disagree.

The Greek root for charity is *charis*, which is grace.

Charity is to love as God loves. There is an interesting phrase in this reading from Romans, but you must really slow down to notice it. Here's what three translations say: "Let no debt remain outstanding" (NIV). "Owe nothing to anyone except to (agape) love one another" (NAS). "Don't run up debts, except for the huge debt of love you owe each other." (The Message)

This passage is set into the context of chapter 13 where Paul addresses the thorny problem of church and state. Paul basically supports obedience to the authority of the state. He talks about our civil duty. And **then** he talks about our **duty** to love.

He says, we owe it to each other to love. We OWE it. It's the only thing we are supposed to owe. It's the only debt we're supposed to have. That's the bar. It is ordinary and extraordinary. It is possible and impossible. It is simple and yet very, very difficult. It is basic, *and* it is radical. To love as God loves.

I didn't really like reading the part about judgment in The Shack. Like the character Mack, it forced me to think about myself, about parts of myself I don't like very much. How I decide between good and bad. How do I know, really, what's best? And how can I possibly know that for someone else? I was forced to admit that I often cast judgment on things I don't know much about, and worse, I cast judgment on people. I don't like to admit it, and I do try to control it, but I still do it.

When I studied God's word this week and I wondered how I might bridge it with something we know, I tossed and turned, unsatisfied with what came to mind. Then I recalled Carl Barth's advice to consider God's word with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other, and a light bulb came on. The wind of the Spirit blew in.

What is all over our newspapers these days? Judgment. Polarization. The opposite of charity.

In our current politically charged environment, we are steeped in judgment and divisive commentary. Maybe some of us have even taken part in it. It is so easy to become polarized in this election year. And we

haven't even hit the negative ad campaigns, but the pundits, politicians, and populace are setting the stage for an ugly fight.

To add fuel to the fire, there is the discourse about faith that has infiltrated both the politics of the red and the politics of the blue. We as thinking Christians cannot avoid this discussion. Nor should we! Because if our faith does not inform our politics, then it is isolated and watered down at best. If our faith does not affect how we live, how we choose, and what we prioritize, then it is but a noisy gong and a clanging cymbal.

This will not be a political sermon. I would **never** presume to tell you how to vote. I do not presume to know which candidate *really* has God's ear. I don't have (nor do I believe anyone has!) the prophetic vision to know whom God chooses. We will never project a candidate's head behind me in worship, or hand you a list of political 'voting points'. When preachers do that, it abuses the power of pulpit. And yes, I am making a judgment.

I do, however, commend to you the wisdom of Jim Wallis, an evangelical activist who asks all of us, of every political stripe, to treat one another civilly, charitably, and, (dare I say it?) lovingly in the coming weeks. Recommendations from his blog are printed on the bulletin insert. I encourage you to read them. Allow them to challenge you as they have challenged me. I believe they capture the spirit of *agape* that Paul urges for all followers of Christ.

How do we *agape* one another? How do we love as God loves? These scripture readings today answer the question, how do we love? With charity. With grace. We share meals; we share the Lord's Supper. It is a sign of our unity and our redemption. We follow God's commands. We do our best to keep from judging one another. We give up our egotistical corner on the market of knowing for sure what is right, especially in matters of opinion. We give up presuming we know best what God intends--- for our friends, for our enemies, for our country. Especially when it mostly serves our personal interests.

These lessons are not just for an election year. They are for all of life. We do our best to resolve conflict with love. We talk to those with whom we disagree. We presume the best, rather than worst, in others. We invite others with whom we disagree to join in dialogue. And we listen, really listen, instead of just biding our time to think of a winning response. And we rest in the inherent goodness of the God who loved us first.

We owe it to each other to love. We OWE it. It's the only thing we owe. That's the bar. It is ordinary and extraordinary. It is possible and impossible. It is simple and yet difficult. It is basic, *and* it is radical. To love as God loves. That's it.