

August 28

Lesson 13

LOVE FULFILLS

THE LAW

DEVOTIONAL READING: Deuteronomy 11:13-21

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Romans 12:1, 2; 13:8-14

ROMANS 12:1, 2

¹ Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. ² Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

ROMANS 13:8-10

⁸ 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.



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KEY VERSE

Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law. —Romans 13:8

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Summarize the relationship between being a "living sacrifice" and living with the continual obligation to "love one another."
2. Understand why neighbor love is the underlying assumption behind the ethical commandments.
3. Help prepare a worship service that is focused on the theme of being a living sacrifice.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. Metamorphosis
- B. Lesson Background

I. The Surrender of Self (ROMANS 12:1, 2)

A. Living Sacrifice (v. 1)

The Perfect Gift

B. Renewed Mind (v. 2)

The Path of Most Resistance

II. The Law of Love (ROMANS 13:8-10)

A. Ongoing Obligation (v. 8)

B. Key Commandment (v. 9)

C. Underlying Assumption (v. 10)

Conclusion

A. Living and Sacrificing

B. Prayer

C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. Metamorphosis

One of the most remarkable phenomena we observe in nature is the change of a caterpillar into a butterfly. The caterpillar is a wormlike creature with many feet, eating leaves as it crawls among plants. It sheds skin as it grows larger, eating continually. Finally, it spins a cocoon around itself and seems to go into hibernation. After many days, this creature emerges from the cocoon. It looks nothing like the caterpillar it once was, for now it is a six-legged insect with glorious wings. Formerly limited to waddling around on plants and trees, it can now fly, for it is a butterfly. Scientists call this transformation from caterpillar to butterfly *metamorphosis*.

The word chosen by scientists for this process is actually an ancient Greek term that means “to change form.” This is radical transformation, though, like going from a slug-like larva to a beautiful winged creature capable of flight. This Greek word occurs four times in the New Testament. It is translated “transfigured” in [Matthew 17:2](#) and [Mark 9:2](#), as “transformed” in [2 Corinthians 3:18](#) and [Romans 12:2](#). As we study the latter verse this week, we are to think of drastic change—a personal transformation so profound that we can hardly remember what it was like to be a spiritual caterpillar.

B. Lesson Background

The book of Romans was written by Paul to Christians living in a city he had not yet visited. Although he knew some people there (see [Romans 16](#)), most did not know him personally.

The book itself (actually, a letter) is well organized. The sequence of thought in the first 11 of its 16 chapters begins with an exposition of the origin and scope of sin, follows with an explanation of the remedy for sin, and wraps up with a discussion of the fate of the unbelieving Jewish nation. Due to the nature of their content, these first 11 chapters are often referred to as *the doctrinal section*, meaning that they present teaching that is foundational to our understanding of the Christian faith.

In [Romans 12](#), the apostle Paul moves to what is often called *the practical section* of the letter. Here we see concerns for how the great truths of the church are to be worked out in the lives of its members. Paul instructs in such things as the use of spiritual gifts ([12:3-8](#)), how to relate to governing authorities ([13:1-7](#)), and the dangers of judging others ([14:10-13](#)). These closing chapters are characterized by key summary statements such as “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” ([12:21](#)) and “Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you” ([15:7](#)). Today’s lesson examines two texts drawn from this rich practical section.

I. The Surrender of Self

(ROMANS 12:1, 2)

A. Living Sacrifice (v. 1)

1a. Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters,

In reading the Bible, we should always pay careful attention to the word *therefore*. Paul uses this word here as a marker to signal that he is moving from the *what* and *why* of [Romans 1-11](#) to the *how* of chapters 12 and following. It is as if Paul is saying, “Since you have listened to all the things I have said up to now, here’s how your lives should be affected.” Stated another way, Paul is about to say how Jesus’ victory over sin and the Father’s proving of his love should influence behavior.

The phrase *I urge you* that accompanies the word *therefore* indicates that what comes next rises above a quiet, logical presentation for the apostle. What he has to say next he does so with great insistence.

1b. in view of God’s mercy,

This phrase highlights Paul’s urgency. The word translated *mercy* here is used frequently in the Greek translation of the Psalms to supply context for urgent requests made to the Lord (see [Psalms 25:6](#); [40:11](#); [69:16](#)). In the case at hand, Paul is imploring the Christians in Rome (rather than God himself) by reminding them that the Lord is the God of great mercy. This, in some ways, sums up the character of God as revealed in the first 11 chapters of the letter (compare [Romans 9:16](#), [18](#), [23](#); [11:30-32](#)).

1c. to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper

worship.

Paul now turns to the vernacular of the temple, of presenting *sacrifice*. The language of sacrifice depicts the act of offering an animal in the Jerusalem temple (or even in a pagan temple). Such language is also used by the Jews when they “present” a firstborn son at the temple (see [Luke 2:22-24](#)); this is part of the ritual of “redeeming” the firstborn according to Jewish law by offering a sacrifice in the child’s stead (compare [Exodus 13:2, 12, 13](#); [Numbers 18:15](#)).

The offering Paul has in mind, though, is not an animal or an animal substitute such as grain. Rather, he urges the Romans to present their *bodies*, their very selves. They are to be *living* sacrifices, not lambs or goats who do not survive the sacrificial act.

It has often been noted that there is a problem with a living sacrifice: it keeps crawling off the altar! A dead sacrifice is much more practical, since it won’t move. Paul’s striking imagery reminds us of Abraham, who bound his son Isaac and placed him on an altar to be sacrificed. Isaac was alive when his father laid him there ([Genesis 22:9](#)). That altar had dry wood that was ready to be set on fire. Abraham intended to kill his son and burn his body, being convinced that that was what God wanted him to do ([22:2](#)).

God’s plan, however, was to test Abraham, not to witness and accept Isaac’s death ([Genesis 22:12](#)). Isaac was of much more use to the Lord alive. As Paul relates in [Romans 9](#), Isaac was to be the instrument of promise, a son chosen to be a key figure in building a future great nation. God will test our willingness to sacrifice our lives for him. But except in the cases of martyrdom, he wants to use those holy lives in his service.

What Do You Think?

How can you be more of a living sacrifice in the week ahead?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

As an individual Christian

As part of a wider group of Christians

Paul describes this as our *true and proper worship*. The word translated *true and proper* is the source of our word *logical*. The word translated *worship* is rendered “service” in the *King James Version*, and this is where we get the idea of a “worship service” (compare [John 16:2](#)). When we worship God, we are serving God. When we serve God, we are worshipping God.

This is all tied to Paul’s “therefore” that introduces this section. Given all the territory the apostle has covered in explaining the great love, mercy, and grace of God, the willing sacrifice of ourselves is the only true and proper response. Would we spit in God’s eye in ongoing rebellion when we realize all he has done for us? Paul does not think so!

THE PERFECT GIFT

I recall the summer of our twenty-fifth anniversary. Although we had agreed not to buy each other anything, my husband actually polled his coworkers for gift ideas. Some suggested candy. He knew that was not something I would want. His advisers were sure he was mistaken when he said I would not like a pricey bauble from the jewelry store either.

So he stuck to his knowledge of me, and what he chose was a wonderful surprise: a portable CD player. (This was a few years and a few technological advances ago!) He knew I loved to be outside, but I also liked to listen to music. I was warmed to realize that he had actually heard me say something about my no-way-to-have-music-outside dilemma and that he cared enough to formulate a solution.

Heartfelt, thoughtful gifts are a wonderful way to express love and appreciation. So, how can we not want to give something to God? But what do you give someone who has everything ([Psalm 50:10](#))? Listening to what he says he desires will give us the key: he wants us as living, holy sacrifices. We give our lives to God moment by moment, choice by choice. It is this that he desires—and deserves.—V. E.

HOW TO SAY IT

Isaac *Eye-zuk*.

metamorphosis *met-tuh-mor-fuh-suss*.

rabbi *rab-eye*.

B. Renewed Mind (v. 2)

**2. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.
Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.**

How do we perform this true and proper service of worship to God? Paul uses vibrant words here to explain further.

The Greek word translated *conform* is the source of our English word *schematic*—a drawing that details the plan for a device such as a smartphone. Once the schematic is created, thousands or millions of identical devices can be produced from it. It is as if Paul is saying, “Don’t follow the world’s schematic diagram!”

If we are following the world’s *pattern*, then we are not doing the right sort of service for God. The world tells us that greed is good and that we should look out for ourselves most of all. Serving God, however, means that we love others and give to those in need, even if it cramps our own lifestyle and desires.

What Paul is *not* saying is that we are to be nonconformists in everything. The command *do not conform to the pattern of this world* is not a

license to break rules. Every teacher labors to train children in ways of conformity that are beneficial for everyone. When youngsters are asked to line up, the little boy who can never seem to do so is not a person serving God by being a nonconformist. Rather, he is a rebellious soul that needs to learn basic discipline and how to follow rules.

Christians have sometimes used Paul's *do not conform* exhortation as an excuse to refuse to do things they don't want to do. This is far from Paul's intent (compare [Romans 13:1, 2](#)). The idea, rather, is that we don't follow the rules of the world when they conflict with *what God's will is* (compare [Acts 4:19; 5:29; Colossians 2:8, 18-23](#)). Our schematic for living is the Word of God, not the selfish souls we see in popular media.

The flip side of conforming is being *transformed* (see discussion of the word *metamorphosis* in the Introduction). This verb is in the passive voice, meaning that we do not transform ourselves; rather, we allow ourselves to be transformed by the power of God. Paul refers to this as *the renewing of your mind*, meaning this is not a physical transformation. This is not losing weight and working out at the gym to tone our bodies (compare [1 Timothy 4:8](#)). It is instead a spiritual transformation, a mental renewal, a new way of thinking, a new orientation to the world.

We do not despise the world, but we are not controlled by its corruption either. This is a transformation by the Holy Spirit into being a servant who is pleasing to God. In a sermon on this passage, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. described this as being "transformed nonconformists." Christians should never become adjusted to certain things that are acceptable in popular culture. King also noted that "There are some things in our world to which men of goodwill must be maladjusted."

True transformation is a one-way process. If we have been changed by the Holy Spirit, we should not relapse into old ways (compare [2 Timothy 4:10a](#)). Nothing is the same for us. Our priorities are different. Our goals are different. Our ambitions are different. Our lives are renewed, transformed. Our guiding star is God's *good, pleasing and perfect will*. Our renewed souls are ready to know it and follow it (compare [Ephesians 4:23](#)).

THE PATH OF MOST RESISTANCE I

Neuroscience has shown that our brains switch to a more meditative, suggestible state while watching television. I may not have felt overly alarmed from learning of that study had I not experienced the effects personally.

I remember watching a certain prime-time series over the course of a season. As I grew to know the backstories, endearing quirks, and hopes and dreams of the characters, I found myself cheering on the growing romance of two figures in the drama. I found myself hoping that by season's end they would declare their love for each other. Then I realized they were married to other people! This wasn't something I agreed with at all!

I won't blame television completely. The story line drew me in, and I allowed myself to enjoy the drama. I was not watching in order to critique the morality of the message, but merely as entertainment. But therein lies the rub. If we do not hold tight to the command God gives us to take every thought captive ([2 Corinthians 10:5](#)), we can find our values eroding into whatever the culture suggests.

Anti-Christian messages lurk everywhere. The admonition "do not conform" requires active awareness and resistance on our part.—V. E.

What Do You Think?

What are some things this world offers that tempt us to conform? How do we resist these?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Within Christian contexts (worship, etc.)

In our daily activities and interactions with unbelievers

II. The Law of Love

(ROMANS 13:8-10)

A. Ongoing Obligation (v. 8)

8. Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law.

Our lesson now shifts to [Romans 13](#), a chapter full of practical instruction for Christian believers. Paul's injunction here combines financial advice with moral advice. A surface reading of the first phrase, *let no debt remain outstanding*, has sometimes been understood to prohibit Christians from borrowing money under any circumstances. This is not Paul's intent and would not be in harmony with other Scriptures (example: [Matthew 5:42](#)).

What is being said, rather, is that debts must be repaid. The wise person will borrow as little and as infrequently as possible (compare [Proverbs 22:7](#)). Pay your debts, Paul says. This is not a surprising or controversial piece of advice, especially for those of a Jewish background. Financial integrity is a desirable quality. But Paul uses this fact to move to his more important point, something that is undoubtedly surprising to many. We do have a continuing debt that requires constant payment. This debt will never be retired. It is the obligation *to love one another*.

The context of this command does not limit it to love for fellow Christians. Paul is pushing beyond the church, to our obligation to the community at large. We are to love those with whom we have any sort of relationship. This is to be unconditional love, not love that is conditioned on receiving love in return.

It is disappointing to hear voices in the public arena that claim to be Christian but are filled with invective. We live in angry times, and unquenchable anger toward others is hardly compatible with Paul's command. This does not mean we must wink at evil, but may God protect our hearts from losing sight of the obligation to love others ([Galatians 5:14](#)).

What Do You Think?

How do you pay your love-debt to humanity? What about "missed payments"?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

When dealing with "easy to love" people

When dealing with people you don't like

B. Key Commandment (v. 9)

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."

Paul now does something that is very compatible with his identity as a Christian of Jewish background and as a trained rabbi who is steeped in the Law of Moses: he lists several of the Ten Commandments (compare [Exodus 20:3-17](#); [Deuteronomy 5:7-21](#)). The ones cited are sometimes referred to as "ethical commandments" in that they give divine requirements for human relationships. We are to honor marriage boundaries (see [Matthew 5:27, 28, 32](#); [Hebrews 13:4](#)). We are to guard the sanctity of human life (see [Matthew 5:21, 22](#)). We are to respect the possessions of others (see [Luke 3:12, 13](#)). We are to be satisfied with our own possessions (see [Luke 12:15](#)). With these we may compare the descriptions in [Revelation 21:8](#); [22:15](#) of those excluded from eternal life.

What Do You Think?

What helps you overcome the temptation to covet?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Regarding others' possessions

Regarding others' accomplishments

Regarding others' jobs

Regarding others' relationships

All of these are products of the heart determined to love others. If we are controlled by love, none of these will be a problem for us. How can we commit adultery with another person's spouse if we want what is best for other people? How can a loving heart commit murder? How can we steal from those created in the image of God as we are? How can we jeopardize our attitude toward others by being jealous of what they have?

All of this is covered in the great commandment of neighbor love ([Matthew 22:39](#)). We must love our neighbors (all whom we have contact with) as we love our own selves. We do not want to be victims of infidelity, murder, theft, or jealousy. If we love others, we do not want to be the perpetrators of any of these either.

C. Underlying Assumption (v. 10)

10. Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.

While other parts of the book of Romans are addressed specifically to Gentiles in the congregation ([Romans 11:13](#); etc.), here Paul seems to be speaking especially to his fellow Jews. They have been raised to love the Law of Moses, and an essence *of the law* is to care about others. Loving others includes doing *no harm* to them. Relationships will be concerned with a neighbor's best interests. Therefore Paul's Jewish readers are to relax on giving undue attention to the specifics of the law. If relationships are controlled by love, then adherence to the law will take care of itself.

This is an important insight on Paul's understanding of the Jewish law. In [Romans 7](#) he portrays the law as a tyrant that rules over humanity. This is not because the law is evil or ill intended, though. It is because some teachers of the law use it as a club to bludgeon their followers into conformity. The law itself is a good thing (see [Romans 7:12](#)). The rigid keeping of the law based on fear and/or with the expectation of earning God's favor is not fulfilling the intent of the law.

We should not be motivated to keep God's commands out of fear, for fear is a short-term emotion that eventually fades. We should not be motivated to keep the commandments as a way of earning God's favor, because that is futile (see [Galatians 5:4](#)). We should be motivated by love.

Love is a characteristic rooted in the nature of God himself. He has proven his love for us by giving his Son to die on our behalf ([Romans 5:8](#)). God has promised that we will never be cut off from his love ([8:38, 39](#)). God's demonstration of his great love is sufficient motivation for us always to act with love first in our relationships.

What Do You Think?

When, if ever, would a harsh act be appropriate and proper if it were intended to benefit the other in the long run?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Regarding a Christian "neighbor" (considering [Acts 15:37-40](#); [1 Corinthians 5:13](#); etc.)

Regarding an unbelieving "neighbor" (considering [Luke 9:5, 52-55](#); [Acts 13:9-12](#); etc.)

Regarding the "tough love" concept

Other

Conclusion

A. Living and Sacrificing

Although only five verses total, our lesson text is packed with imperatives that resonate in our lives today. We are centuries removed from Paul and his Roman audience, yet these verses are great examples of the living Word, affecting every generation of Christians.

How much are you willing to sacrifice for God? How deep does your desire to serve him really go? We normally think of sacrifice as foregoing things and activities that people typically enjoy. But it is no sacrifice for me personally to say, “As a sacrifice, I will not drink beer,” because I do not drink beer anyway (my personal choice). Similarly, our claims of sacrifice are often shallow and painless in that we tend to give up things we don’t care much about anyway. So the question remains: How and what are you willing to sacrifice for God?



Visual for Lesson 13. Start a discussion by turning this statement into a question as you ask, “Exactly how does love fulfill the law?”

Paul is not telling us to give up beloved things. He is not advising us to make our lives more painful and less enjoyable as a sign of spiritual maturity. He is urging us to *be* a sacrifice. If we do this, we hold nothing back. All our possessions, actions, attitudes, abilities, relationships, etc., are surrendered to God’s will. This is what it means to be a living sacrifice. To be a sacrifice means we are ready for God’s transforming power as we consider how best to live as his servants among his servants ([1 Corinthians 8:13](#); etc.).

We cannot transform ourselves. If we try to achieve godliness through conforming, we will fail. We must allow the great transformer—God working through his Holy Spirit and his Holy Word—to change us.

B. Prayer

Lord God, you are the great transformer of souls! Mold us according to your perfect will so our service will be acceptable. May our relationships be a reflection of your own love for us. We pray these things in the name of your Son, Jesus, who showed us how to love and follow you in all things. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Transformation reveals itself in love.

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Into the Lesson

Ask who has been the victim of either a robbery or burglary. Allow volunteers to share experiences briefly in that regard. Then ask, “If the person who stole from you tried later to convince you that they really loved you, would you believe them? Why, or why not?” After a response that is along the lines of “love and stealing don’t go together,” say, “In today’s lesson, Paul will help us understand the close connection between loving people and keeping God’s commandments.”

Alternative. Place in chairs copies of the “Clear as Mud?” activity from the reproducible page, which you can download, for learners to begin working on as they arrive. After discussing results, say, “People of Paul’s day, being familiar with dead sacrifices as they were, must have been startled by the idea of a *living sacrifice*! Let’s take a closer look at that phrase and its implications.”

Into the Word

Form learners into three small groups to work on the assignments below, which you have reproduced on handouts.

Living Sacrifice Group. Read [Romans 12:1](#) and give reasons why you agree or disagree with the following statements. 1-“God is less concerned with what we do with our bodies than he is with the condition of our souls.” 2-“In some ways it’s easier to be a dead martyr than a living sacrifice.” 3-“Paul’s reference to God’s mercy is the same as that in [Romans 9:16-18](#) (lesson 11).”

Renewed Minds Group. Read [Romans 12:2](#) and give reasons why you agree or disagree with the following statements. 1-“It’s important that we be radically different from other people in the world, so we don’t conform to their way of doing things.” 2-“If you want to change the way you act, ask God to help you change the way you think.” 3-“No one can really know what God’s will for him or her is.”

Love One Another Group. Read [Romans 13:8-10](#) and give reasons why you agree or disagree with the following statements. 1-“Being in any kind of financial debt is sinful since the Bible says ‘let no debt remain outstanding.’” 2-“If we all loved our neighbors as ourselves, we wouldn’t need to have any laws.” 3-“You have to feel the appropriate emotion in order to love others and fulfill the law.”

After calling time, have spokespersons from groups read their statements and responses in the ensuing whole-class discussion. Explore whether conclusions are the result of group consensus or if there is a “minority report” to consider. Encourage members of other groups to evaluate the conclusions and the reasons for them. Use the commentary to correct misconceptions.

Write this equation on the board: *living sacrifice* = *loving one another* = *keeping the law*. By show of hands, ask who agrees and disagrees with the equation, which proposes that these concepts are interchangeable. Ask why learners agree or disagree. For those disagreeing, ask, “If the equal signs are not appropriate, what would be a better way of showing how these three concepts are related?”

Into Life

Brainstorm ways for a worship service to be based on the theme *living sacrifice*. Depending on the size of your class, you can use small groups or whole-class discussion to propose how to reflect the theme in music selection, Scripture reading (in addition to [Romans 12:1](#)), communion and offering meditations, a skit, prayers, etc. Record ideas for submission to your church’s worship planner(s).

Option. Distribute copies of the “Words of Wisdom” activity from the reproducible page. Form learners into pairs to consider one or both of the scenarios. Challenge learners to use today’s lesson text as a basis for the counsel they would offer to either “Beth” or “Sam.” Allow time for pairs to share their responses in whole-class discussion.