

# The Law of Love

Romans 13:8-14; Matthew 18:15-20

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

By: Ryan Dueck

September 6, 2026/Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost

As you know, most Mondays I spend the day just down the road serving as a chaplain the Lethbridge Correctional Centre.

In the morning, I meet with inmates who request visits and distribute materials like notebooks, bibles, and other reading material.

In the afternoons, I have sessions with two of the remand units. Our times together follow a similar format each week. At the beginning, we have a welcome and a short devotion or reflection. At the end, we have prayer requests and a closing prayer.

In between we watch and discuss a portion of an episode from a show called *The Chosen*.

I've referred to this show before. I know some of you have watched it. It's a show that basically tells the story of the three years of Jesus' public ministry, the healings, the miracles, the teachings, all of it.

Five seasons are completed, the sixth will be released next year. Season 5 ends with Judas' betrayal and Jesus' arrest in the garden.

I know some people aren't fans of the show. It isn't perfect. It creates storylines that aren't in Scripture. It may get this or that historical or cultural detail wrong. It imports questions and assumptions from our time and place that wouldn't necessarily have been the same in the ancient world.

But at the jail, it's a great tool. I've tried other formats and other resources, but the guys always want to come back to this show. They love it.

Many of them struggle to read. Their attention spans are short (and getting shorter, like all of ours in the digital age!). *The Chosen* is an engaging way into the story of Jesus for them.

One of the reasons many of them like the show so much is because they resonate with the characters and the way they are portrayed in the show. Matthew, in particular, and particularly in the first few seasons.

Matthew is portrayed as having some obsessive tendencies, as being disowned by his parents due to his collaboration with the Romans as a tax collector. He's socially awkward and doesn't read cues very well. He is looked down on, even despised by his people.

Matthew carries a lot of shame and feels unworthy due to what he did before he encountered Jesus. Even once Jesus calls him and he's one of the disciples, he feels like an outsider.

Now, all of this is of course speculation on behalf of the creators of the show.

Scripture doesn't give us much by way of character development or psychological analysis or back stories, even for significant figures. At least not by today's standards. We know next to nothing about the details of Jesus' childhood, for example.

But it's not hard to imagine that at least some of how Matthew is portrayed in *The Chosen* could be true.

At any rate, it connects with the guys on Monday. Many of them know what it is to have their families turn their back on them, to experience debilitating shame, to feel like a marginalized outsider, to be socially awkward, to feel unworthy, conflicted, guilty.

And having spent the last three years watching part of this show almost every week, I can't help but think of Matthew when I read passages like our gospel text this morning.

It's a passage about conflict and how to handle sin in the church.

In what has come to be known as the "Rule of Christ," Jesus instructs us to first approach someone who has sinned against us individually, then, if that doesn't work,

to bring along a few others as witnesses, and then, finally to bring it to the wider church.

If the offender still does not listen, Jesus says to “let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.”

Christians have proven very adept, throughout history, at taking the things that Jesus says about how we are to live together and turning them into weapons, often paying little attention to the spirit or intent of Jesus words.

This passage, in particular, has been used to justify shunning and excommunicating “sinners.”

Often, people have been a little too eager to get to the last stage of the process where we get to “treat people as Gentiles and tax collectors”—in other words, to have little more to do with them. To judge and dispose of them.

I’m not a Mennonite historian, but I’ve talked to a few of them and I’ve read enough and heard enough stories to know that Mennonites have, at times, been guilty of turning the Rule of Christ into a harsh and punitive means of enforcing social control.

It has been applied mechanically and without mercy. It has torn apart families and churches. Some of you may know of this better than I do.

Yet, the obvious question—one that I couldn’t help but think of again this week as I read this passage and then went out and encountered the character of Matthew in *The Chosen* out at the jail—is this: What did it look like for someone to be to Jesus as a Gentile or a tax collector?

How did Jesus treat Matthew, the tax collector, the very one whose gospel this passage is found in?

He honoured him by choosing him, dignified him by calling and inviting him, and won him over by loving him.

And what about the category of “Gentile?” Well, one of Jesus’ most famous parables puts a Gentile Samaritan in the starring role, showing “insiders” what genuine love looks like (Luke 10:29-37).

Or we could look to Matthew 15 which records the story of Jesus saying that he had never found faith in all of Israel that was greater than that of a Canaanite woman who cried out to Jesus on behalf of her daughter and believed that she could be healed.

We could add more stories from throughout the gospels, but even these brief references are enough to make the obvious point.

We know very well how Jesus treated and understood tax collectors and Gentiles.

He loved them.

He gave them starring roles in the stories he told, thus upending commonly-held categories of “insiders” and “outsiders.”

He healed them.

He praised their faith.

He invited them into a deeper and truer experience of God.

The question this passage asks of us is not, as it has often been interpreted, “When do we get to cut someone out of our lives or out of our community?”

Rather “Does the love of Jesus now require us to love this person as an outsider to try to win back or to love them in a relationship of mutual accountability as an insider?”

Either way, our response is simple: we are to love.

To read this text as a step-by-step manual for the eventual exclusion of “sinners” is, I think, to quite badly misinterpret both the words of Scripture and the spirit and example of Jesus himself.

The question it should leave with us is a simple one: What should love of neighbour look like in this situation?

///

Well, from The Rule of Christ, let’s move to our second passage this morning.

Here, too, Paul reminds us that it’s all about love. His words are stark in their simplicity:

Owe no one anything, except to love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law... Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

To love someone is to desire what is best for them. Sometimes what love requires in a given moment is compassion and concrete acts of self-giving service. Sometimes, it is care, kindness, attention. Sometimes it is to defend someone, to elevate, them, to honour them. Sometimes it will look like mercy and forgiveness.

Other times, love will involve correction, for it is not loving to allow someone to destroy themselves and others with their behaviour.

Sometimes love may mean a hard conversation, as Jesus makes plain in our gospel text today.

But always, love will involve an investment in others.

It's possible that we were cheering Paul along in the first part of the Romans text and then squirming a bit in the second.

"Love is the fulfilling of the law." Well, hooray and amen. It's all about love.

But then Paul follows this with a bracing call to wake up and throw off the works of darkness. He calls out revelling and drunkenness, illicit sex, and licentiousness, quarrelling and jealousy.

It's a jarring transition. I have a prayer app that I sometimes listen to on my drive in to the church which includes one of the lectionary readings for the day. This morning, they cut the reading off at "love is the fulfilling of the law" and skipped all the "wake up" stuff.

How does the "wake up" stuff fit with the talk of love with which this passage begins? The second part sounds like a rather stern moral lecture and we could do without one of those, thank you very much!

In his *Confessions*, St. Augustine famously said "'Men love the truth when it enlightens them, but hate the truth when it reproves them.'" Isn't this the truth?

We tend to imagine that love is incompatible with urging ourselves and others to walk away from sin. Love is being nice and kind and inoffensive.

This is not the biblical view of love. This is not how Jesus loved, much as we sometimes imagine this to be the case.

Love always desires the best for the other. No one would say a parent was loving if they let their small children do whatever they wanted and was just kind to them all the time. Same goes for someone watching a friend spiralling out of control in some addiction or other.

Sometimes the debt of love we owe one another is a reminder of the lives that we have been summoned to as followers of Jesus.

And sometimes, we need a wake up call, as Paul says.

It's easy to sleepwalk through life, putting one foot in front of the other, perhaps coasting along on the fumes of a faith we embraced once upon a time, but we haven't given a great deal of thought to since.

Our text from Romans is meant to wake us up to the reality that this God has created us for good works—that our lives are meant to align with the future that God is leading all of creation toward.

Put on the Lord Jesus Christ and his way of being in the world. Emulate his mercy, his forgiveness, his holiness, his upside-down priorities, his love. Don't make life all about you and your selfish desires. Wake up!

And here is the important part for us to remember.

We seek to do all of these things that Paul is talking about (and others, too) not out of grim duty or because God has some kind of interest in us being miserable or doesn't like to see us having fun or anything like that.

We avoid the things that Paul is talking about because we believe that participating in these things is unworthy of the love to which we have been called.

We put on the Lord Jesus Christ because our current clothes don't fit as well as we think they do. We are broken, sinful people whose desires and inclinations are often disordered and lead us down destructive roads.

We do all this because Jesus has given us a better target to aim for, a better vision about our purpose and destiny as human beings!

We are invited to fully embrace now what we will fully and finally become when Christ comes again.

“Love” is the word that captures all of this. It is the fulfillment of the law, it is the debt we “owe” to our fellow humans beings, inside or outside of the community of faith, whether they are “one of us” or not, whether they share our ethnicity, our faith, our politics, our whatever.

It is even (or especially) is to shape how we handle thorny things like sin and conflict.

For the Christian, love is ground zero. Love is the origin and destiny of all of our striving and believing and hoping and doing and longing.

Every command we try to follow, every attempt at self-denial and holiness and purity, every attempt to find a way through the sin and conflict that plagues our human relationships—all of it finds its fulfillment in love.

Love is who God is. Therefore, love is who we are to be as well.

///

I’m going to give the last word today to Wendell Berry. I imagine a few of you know this name?

Berry was a well-known American novelist, poet, essayist, environmental activist, cultural critic and farmer. I say “was” because he died this past Monday at the age of 92.

Wendell Berry lived with his wife Tanya on a 12-acre farm in Kentucky for the past 61 years. He famously resisted technology, handwriting all of his essays and books, refusing to own a computer or a cell phone.

I read a funny story this week about how it took a reporter the better part of two weeks and involved multiple unanswered landline calls and a hand-delivered letter from an acquaintance to get in touch with him.

Wendell Berry was a fierce advocate for the local, the communal, the small, the sustainable, the relational, the human.

Whatever one made of his rejection of technology or his farming ideals and practices, I think most would agree that Berry's was a wise and influential voice for the Christian faith over the last half-century or more.

This from *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays*:

I take literally the statement in the Gospel of John that God loves the world. I believe that the world was created and approved by love, that it subsists, coheres, and endures by love, and that, insofar as it is redeemable, it can be redeemed only by love. I believe that divine love, incarnate and indwelling in the world, summons the world always toward wholeness, which ultimately is reconciliation and atonement with God.

May God help us to live into the love we were made for.

Amen.

