

Love as Empress and Fulfillment of the Law

A Sermon on Romans 13:8-10

by

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Translated

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Sermon for the Fourth Sunday after Epiphany on Romans 13:8-10¹

Do not owe anybody anything except to love one another. For he who loves the other has fulfilled the law. For what is said: You shall not commit adultery; you shall not kill; you shall not steal; you shall not give false testimony; you shall not covet, and whatever additional commandments there are, all this is comprehended in this word: You shall love the neighbor as yourself. Love does no harm to the neighbor. Therefore, love is the fulfillment of the law.

Romans 13:8-10

This too is an exhorting passage that entices us to produce the fruits of faith, as the previous two did as well.² But in this passage, St. Paul briefly summarizes everything and finally includes all the fruits of faith in love. In the verses immediately prior to this text, Paul taught about how one should be subject to the government, how one should give taxes, customs, fear, and honor to whom they are due because all powers and government have been ordained by God. This is followed by this passage:

Do not owe anybody anything except to love one another.

Here I let go of the various explanations given by other theologians who tried to determine the meaning of these words: “Do not owe anybody anything except to love one another.” I think this is the simple plain meaning: You are to owe the debt of love, not as humans, but as Christians, so that your debt be a free debt of love, not a necessary debt out of the law. Thus, St. Paul here indicates two types of debt—the one that is according to the law; the other that is according to love. Debt according to the law turns people into debtors before others, so that one has a right and entitlement against the other due to the debt. This is the reason one gives taxes, customs, obedience, honor, etc. to the government. To be sure, these things are not necessary for a Christian for his own sake, as a Christian is not improved or justified by these works. But because a Christian must live on earth, he owes it according to the outward man to make himself equal to all others in such and similar debt and so to help to preserve the common temporal order and peace. This is also why Christ pays the tax in Matthew 17:27 as a debt, although he previously discussed with Peter that he did not owe this debt (Matthew 17:25-26). He therefore would not have sinned before God if he had not paid the tax.

The other debt is that of love where a Christian willingly makes himself into everyone’s servant, as St. Paul says in 1 Cor. 9:19: “Although I was free, I made myself into everyone’s servant.” No human law demands that this debt be paid or inflicts punishment when this debt is not paid. Likewise, no one admonishes another person regarding this debt. For neither man nor the whole world knows that love is commanded. They also do not understand how one is to serve, be

¹ The translation of this 1525 sermon is based on the German text found in the St. Louis Edition of Luther’s Works 12:360-381. A different contemporary translation of this sermon is found in Luther’s Works: American Edition (AE) 76:267-282.

² Luther here refers to the readings from Romans 12:6-16 for the Second Sunday after Epiphany and Romans 12:17-21 for the Third Sunday after Epiphany. A translation of Luther’s sermon on these texts can be found in AE 76:209-237.

subject to, and owe the other. This is clearly seen in daily life. For a rich person is considered good according to all laws simply when he refrains from taking what belongs to others, taking somebody else's wife, or harming their body or honor. But no law punishes this person for living only for himself; for being stingy and miserly; for not lending, giving, or helping anybody with his property; or for demanding his property back when it is taken from him. For the laws that coerce the outward man only restrain evil works but leave good works free. The laws do not extort good works by punishment or threats. Instead, they praise and reward good works. This is also what the law of Moses does.

Accordingly, St. Paul here wants to teach Christians that they should conduct themselves toward the government and everybody else so that no one has a complaint or demand against them, as if they owed them according to outward law and government. The initial debt should not be owed by the Christians. Instead, they should do more than they owe by law. Even without anybody making any demands, they should make themselves into debtors and serve those who have no right or entitlement to their service. St. Paul likewise says in Romans 1:14: "I am a debtor of Greeks and Non-Greeks," etc. Such debt makes a person ready to do more than what is demanded of him. This is why he anticipates the demand of others and gives to the government and to everybody in the outward order what he should, so that they may not demand the repayment of any debt from him.

This is why the apostle's manner of speaking essentially means to say: Owe everybody so that you don't owe anybody. Owe everything so that you don't owe anything. These statements seem to contradict each other. But the first part looks to love before God, while the second part looks to law and government before the world. For those who become everyone's servants and debtors by love do so much that no one in the world may complain about them. Indeed, they do much more than anybody desires. This is why, by so doing, they become debt-free. They do not owe anybody anything precisely because they make themselves anybody's debtor.

The Spirit uses this manner of speaking also on other issues: Do no good work in order to do nothing but good works. Be never good and holy in order to always be good and holy. And as St. Paul says in Romans 12:16: "Do not be wise in your own opinion." This means, as he says in 1 Corinthians 3:18: "If you want to be wise, become a fool in order to be wise."

This is also what St. Paul means here: Be everyone's debtor in order to owe no one anything. Or: Do not owe anybody anything except to love one another etc.

For all this is said concerning the two kingdoms. Those who wish to do good works before God should avoid the good work that look great before the world and by which the people think to become good. And those who wish to become good and holy should avoid the holiness that consists in works done apart from faith. Likewise, those who wish to be wise should despise wisdom apart from the Spirit, that is, the wisdom that humans and nature employ. Likewise, those who wish to owe no one anything should owe everybody everything. This way, they will not retain anything of their own. By doing so, they are immediately lifted above all laws which bind only those who have something of their own. For a proverb correctly says: Those who let go

of all their property have paid everybody. How can they owe anything to anybody, if they do not have, and are unable to have, anything of their own?

This is also what love does. This is why it is best to owe no one anything by becoming everybody's debtor in all things by love. It is said in the same way: If you do not wish to die, die. If you do not wish to be a prisoner, become a prisoner. If you do not wish to go to hell, go to hell. If you do not wish to be a sinner, become a sinner. If you want to be rid of the cross, take up your cross. If you wish to overcome the devil, let the devil overcome you. If you wish to coerce an evil person, let the evil person coerce you.

All this is to say that we must freely surrender and willing put up with whatever God, devil, and the people want to do to us, so we do not get attached. Let everything come and go as it comes and goes. This is also why St. Paul has used this manner of speaking: "Do not owe anybody anything" etc. Otherwise, he could have simply left it at what he said in Romans 13:7 above: "Give everybody what you owe."

For he who loves the other has fulfilled the law.

We have often spoken about love and its ways and fruits. It is therefore not necessary to discuss this here. As it is, 1 Corinthians 13, the epistle reading for the Sunday before Lent, will sufficiently talk about it.³ This is why we omit this discussion here and consider instead how such love is commanded by the law of God. Many books and instructions have been provided to teach people how to live. In fact, they are innumerable and interminable. There is no end to making books and laws, as we see in secular and spiritual regulations and in spiritual orders and positions. All this would be tolerable and a special grace if all such laws and teachings were applied and dealt with according to love, the chief law, rule, and measure. This is how Holy Scripture does it. It gives many and various laws but draws them all into love and comprehends them in love, even subjecting all laws to love. This is why they must give way and never be law or have any validity if love is violated.

We read many examples of this in Scripture. For instance, Christ himself, in Matthew 12:3-5, points to the example of how David and his followers ate the holy showbreads. For although there was the law that only the priests alone should eat such holy bread (Leviticus 24:9), love here was a free empress over that law and forced it into submission. The law had to make way and cease when David was hungry. The law had to comply with this judgment: David is hungry; he must be helped, just as love says: Do good to your neighbor where he needs it. Therefore, cease, o Law, and do not prevent him from doing this good thing. Rather, o Law, do good to him and serve him in his necessity and do not catch him by your prohibitions. Likewise, Christ also says in Matthew 12 that one should do good to the needy neighbor on the Sabbath, no matter how strictly the law forbids doing anything on the Sabbath (Exodus 20:10). Rather, because it is necessary to help the neighbor, love is to have precedence, and the Sabbath is to mean nothing.

Now, if the laws were drawn into love in this way and if love became the mistress of them all, it would not matter how many laws there are. For even if you might not hear or learn all laws, you

³ For Luther's sermon on this text, see AE 76:339-349.

could hear and learn some laws, perhaps one or two, in whom you would learn the same love that is taught in all of them. And if you heard and learned all laws and yet could not recognize love in all laws, you might at last recognize love in a single law.

St. Paul gives this rule and manner to master and understand the laws in this verse where he says: “Do not owe anything to anyone except to love one another,” likewise, “If you love the other, you have fulfilled the law,” likewise, “Love does no harm to the neighbor,” likewise, “Love is the law’s fulfillment.” All words of St. Paul’s letter to the Romans conclude and say that love is the mistress over all the laws.

Again, there is no greater injustice, no greater misery on earth than where the laws are taught and urged without love. For there the law is nothing but a plague and ruin. Then the proverb is true: The strictest application of the law results in the greatest injustice. And Solomon says in Ecclesiastes 7:16: “Do not be overly righteous.” Indeed, here we leave the beam in our own eye. Indeed, we do not even recognize it but are all about tearing the speck out of our neighbor’s eye. This causes consciences to become timid, terrified, and disheartened, without any necessity or cause, but with great damage to body and soul. Great effort and labor go into this, but it is all lost.

Let us prove this by examples. As mentioned already, David was hungry and the priest gave him the showbread to eat, 1 Samuel 21:6. But if the priest had been unwilling to give him the holy loaves—being so blind as to insist on the law without recognizing love—and had thereby denied David the food, what would have been the result? As far as he was concerned, David would have died of hunger. And the priest would have committed murder for the sake of the law. There would have been nothing but the strictest application of the law, resulting in the greatest injustice. Beyond this, if you took a look into the heart of such a crazy priest, you would find the gruesome abomination that he makes sin and a bad conscience where there is neither sin nor a bad conscience. For he thinks that it is sin to eat the bread, although it would be love and a good work. By contrast, he thinks that murder—letting David die of hunger—is not a sin but a good work and an act of worship of God.

But who can say enough to deplore such gruesome, blind, and perverted foolishness? For if he had dealt with David in this way, the priest would have done the kind of evil that even the devil could not have made worse. For by making sin and a bad conscience where there are none, he would take grace, salvation, virtue, and God with all his good gifts from the person—and all this without cause, and even falsely and deceitfully. By doing so, this priest would completely deny and condemn God. Again, by turning murder and injustice into a good work and an act of worship, the priest would put the devil and lies in the place of God. By doing so, he would institute the greatest idolatry possible and ruin body and soul as follows: By hunger, he would murder the body; and by a bad conscience, he would murder the soul. He would turn God into a devil and turn the devil into a god. He would turn heaven into a hell and turn hell into a heaven. He would turn sin into law and law into sin. I think this is what it means to turn the greatest justice into the greatest injustice.

Ezekiel talks about this in Ezekiel 13:18-19: “Thus says the Lord: Woe to those who make cushions under everybody’s arms and pillows under everybody’s heads to catch their souls. And once they caught the souls of my people, they made them alive. And they profaned me among my people because of a handful of barley and a bite of bread, to kill the souls that did not die, and to make alive the souls that did not live, by their lies to my people that listens to the lie.” What does this mean other than that the blind teachers of the law terrify the consciences and make sin and death where there is life and grace and, vice versa, life and grace where there is sin and death? And all that because of a handful of barley and a bite of bread! That is, they tie such law so tightly to external matters that are quickly consumed like a drink or a bite of food, while letting go of love and tying the conscience to sins unto eternal death.

This is why Ezekiel continues (Ezekiel 13:22-23): “Therefore, because you have falsely saddened the heart of the righteous whom I have not saddened; because you have strengthened the godless in his doings so that he does not repent of his evil deeds so that he may live—because you have done these things, you shall no longer see visions and no longer prophecy. I will save my people from your hands so that you may know that I am the Lord.” See, this is what it means to sadden the pious hearts: to load them with sins where there are good works. This is what it means to strengthen the godless: to admonish them to “good works” that are nothing but sins. Psalm 14:4-5 also talks about this: “They do not call upon the Lord, but there they are afraid,” that is, they make a bad conscience and are afraid where there should be no bad conscience or fear; they are worried that what is a noble act of worship is sin. This is why he says: Where they should call upon God and serve him, there they are afraid that it is sin and not an act of worship. And conversely, where they should be afraid and where there is no worship, there they are secure and not afraid. This is also what Isaiah says in Isaiah 29:13: “They fear me in vain with the commandments of men” etc., so that this perverted people everywhere perverts all things: They call upon God and are not afraid where the devil is—and they do not call upon God and are afraid where God is.

See, this is the plague and the misery of all who blindly deal with laws and works and do not recognize love, the meaning and mistress of the law. We see this in our poor people, the spiritual leaders and all who follow them, how deeply they are stuck and how firmly they cling to what they are doing. Even if the world be ruined, their thing must proceed and stand without variation, even if the body becomes sick or dies, even if the soul perishes and is ruined. And then they think that such murder and ruining is an act of worship! They are not afraid and do not have a bad conscience but strengthen themselves in doing such evil lest they may never repent of their deeds and live. By contrast, when it comes to permitting a poor person to eat meat or get married in order to save body and soul, there is fear, there is a bad conscience, there is sin and law, death and hell. There they neither call upon God nor serve him, even if a body were to die ten times and a soul were to go to the devil a hundred times.

Therefore, see what the world is, what flesh and blood do, if they want to do their best—how dangerous it is to deal with, and govern by, laws, indeed how impossible it is to govern and teach souls by laws without great damage, unless the Spirit and love are there who have all laws in their powerful hands. This is why it is written in Deuteronomy 33:2 that a fiery law is at God’s

right hand. This is the law of love in the Spirit. This law is to rule all laws on the left or all external laws in the world. And according to Exodus 28:30, the priest had to wear on his breastplate the *urim* and *thumim*, that is, light and perfection, because the priest was to enlighten the law with true understanding and to keep and teach the law completely without change.

All laws should therefore be given, ordained, and kept, not for their own sake or for the sake of the works, but only in order to practice love. This is also the true meaning of the law, as St. Paul says here: "If you love the other, you have fulfilled the law," so that, if you see that keeping the law would not benefit but harm the neighbor, you should not keep it. For the same law can be beneficial to the neighbor at one time but harmful to the neighbor at another time. The law should therefore be applied in a way that depends on whether it benefits the neighbor. Laws should therefore be dealt with like food and clothing and other bodily necessities. I should not consider the clothing and food as such but the benefit and needs of the neighbor who is to be fed and clothed. I should stop feeding and clothing the neighbor when I see that he no longer likes it or can no longer bear it.

Now, you might see a fool who thinks by himself: "Well, food and clothing are good things," and who, without thinking any further, goes ahead and takes a person and does nothing else than filling the same with all the bread and beer he could get ahold of and put on him all the clothes he could find, until the person is suffocated and strangled, and who would, even then, keep on stuffing and clothing the person without ceasing. Somebody might say to this fool: "Stop! You have already suffocated the person. You have given the person too much food and clothing. Every work is now lost." But the fool would continue feeding and clothing the person and say: "You heretic, do you want to get in the way of good works? Food and drink and clothing are good things. Therefore, one should not stop and cannot do too much," even as he goes on and on feeding and clothing the person.

Tell me, what would you think about this fool? Nonsense itself would not be as raging mad as such a fool. But just such fools have been our spiritual leaders and all who blindly deal with works and the law, thinking that it is all about the works. They suffocate body and soul and do not see that this is all about practicing love. They therefore place works above love, the maid above the mistress. It is sad even to think about it. How much sadder is it when you hear and see this done to others or when you do and endure it yourself!

Accordingly, this commandment of love is a short commandment and a long commandment. It is a single commandment and many commandments. It is no commandment and all commandments. It is short and simple in itself. Its meaning is quickly grasped. But this commandment is long and many when it comes to putting it into practice. For it comprehends and masters all commandments. And it is no commandment if you look at the works, because it has no specific work attached to it that could be identified by name. But it is all commandments because the works of all commandments are, and should be, its works. This is how the commandment of love abrogates all commandments even as it establishes all commandments. All this means is that we should know and learn not to keep or respect any commandment or any work beyond what love demands.

Now, because we should not and may not be without works on earth, there must be many commandments so that the works may be comprehended in them. But this must be done in such a way that love retains its power and remains the supreme lord over such commandments. Let love, therefore, command which works are to be left undone and which works are to be done according to what serves love. Let works remain, or let them leave, according to love's will.

What this means can be learned from a coachman. The coachman uses the bridle to direct his horses and carriage according to his will. But if the coachman were satisfied with the fact that his horses wear a bridle and did not pay attention to the road to direct his horses and carriage according to the road, he would soon have an accident with his horses, bridle, and carriage. He may even drown in a puddle or break his neck when going over rough terrain. But none of this would happen if the coachman in his wisdom directs his horses along the road, paying attention to where the road is passable and where it is not. By contrast, the foolish coachman takes the straightest route and wants to steer the road according to the carriage, so that the road should follow the lead of the carriage. He will surely see how this will turn out.

This is what happens if you want to govern the people according to the law and the work, not the laws according to the people, just as the coachman steers the road according to the carriage. It is certainly true that the road often nicely "follows" the carriage, going straight ahead. But sometimes, the road is curvy and uneven. There the carriage should also follow the road. Thus, it must be that the people follow the lead of the law and the required works if they can do so and if it is good for them. But where they are harmed by doing so, the law must truly bend and give way. And the ruler must be wise so as to give room for love and abrogate the works and laws. This is also why the philosophers say that prudence—foresight or circumspection, as the theologians call it—is the coachman of all the virtues and must be the master of all virtues.

And you can read in the book of the desert fathers that they came together sometime. And when the question came up which was the noblest work, one said this, the other said that. One mentioned prayer, the other mentioned fasting. But St. Anthony concluded that, among all the works and virtues, circumspection was the best and the safest way to heaven etc. But all this was still a childish and worldly understanding concerning one's self-chosen works. A Christian approaches the matter differently and more energetically, concluding that neither circumspection nor the lack thereof avails anything before God but only faith and love (Galatians 5:6). Love, however, is the coachman and the true circumspection in the good works commanded by God. It always looks toward the benefit and improvement of the neighbor, just as circumspection looks toward the common benefit when it comes to exercising the worldly virtues and directs the laws accordingly. Let this be enough about this issue.

Here a question arises: How is it true that love fulfills the law, although love is only a fruit of faith? We have now said very often that only faith in Christ extinguishes sin, makes righteous, and satisfies the law's demands. How does this square with love as the fulfillment of the law?

To be sure, Christ says in Matthew 7:12: "What you want the people to do to you, do to them. For this is the law and the prophets." By saying so, Christ testifies that love fulfills the law and the prophets. And in Matthew 22:39-40, Christ says: "You shall love God, your Lord, and your

neighbor as yourself. The law and the prophets consist in these two.” But where do these verses leave St. Paul in Romans 3:31: “We establish the law by faith,” and Romans 3:28: “We consider that man is justified by faith without works of the law”? And what about Romans 1:17: “The righteous will live by faith?”

Answer: As we have often said, you must distinguish faith and love so that faith refers to the person while love refers to the works. Faith extinguishes sin and makes the person pleasing and righteous. But once the person has become pleasing and righteous, the Holy Spirit and love is given to the person so that the person willingly does good. Now it is the law’s way to attack the person and demand such good works from the person; its demands will not cease until it gets such good works. A person without Spirit and love is unable to do such works. As a result, the law forces the person to recognize what it lacks. The law also forces the person to recognize that the person first must become different in order to satisfy the demands of the law. For the law is concerned more about works than about the person. Indeed, the law demands only works and is silent about the person. But by demanding works, it lets the person know that the person must become different. But when faith comes, it makes a person who can render the works demanded by the law. This is what it means to fulfill the law. This is why St. Paul puts it nicely and justly, as the matter is in itself. The law demands works from the person and is also fulfilled by works. That is why one cannot properly say that faith fulfills the law, although faith enables the person to fulfill the law. As noted, the law does not demand the person; rather it demands works from the person. Still, by demanding works, the law indicates and urges the person to become different in order to render such works, because the person feels that the person cannot render such works. By contrast, love and works make the person neither different nor righteous. Rather, the person must first become righteous and different in order to do works. Nonetheless, the works show and prove that the person has become righteous and different, especially because such works may not be done if the person is not already without sin and pious.

This is said so that you may observe the true manner and characteristics of the law, of faith, and of love, giving to each its own. Then you will properly understand the verses of Scripture, as follows: Faith makes righteous, but it does not fulfill the law. Love does not make righteous, but it fulfills the law. The law demands love and works and does not mention the person. The person certainly feels the law, but love does not feel the law. For the law demanded works before faith. By doing so, the law is a sign that lets us know, concludes, and convicts us that the person is without faith and not good. Similarly, love, after faith, fulfills the law. And it is also a sign and proves that the person has faith and is pious. Accordingly, the law and love bear witness to the person, showing whether the person is pious or evil. The law bears witness before faith that the person is not good. Love bears witness after faith that the person is good. This is why the person certainly feels the law before faith, because the person does not have what the law demands, although the law does not demand the person but works. But works and love do not fulfill the law because they are the fulfillment itself.

Thus, although faith does not fulfill the law, it has what fulfills the law. For faith acquires the Spirit and love, by which the law is fulfilled. By contrast, although love does not make righteous, it proves that by which the person is righteous, namely, faith. And in sum, as here St. Paul

himself says: “Love is the fulfillment of the law,” as if he should say: These are two different expressions—being the fulfillment of the law and bringing about or giving the fulfillment of the law. Love, therefore, fulfills the law because it is the law’s fulfillment itself. But faith fulfills the law by providing that by which the law is fulfilled. For faith loves and works, as Galatians 5:6 says: “Faith is active in love.” Water fills the jug; the servant also fills the jug. Water does so by itself, but the servant does so by the water. In the language of traditional theology, this means to fill the jug effectively and formally.

Thus, faith remains the doer, and love remains the deed. Now, the law demands the deed, and by doing so, it forces the doer to become different. This is why the law is fulfilled by the deed—but this is the deed the doer must do. St. Paul thereby rejects the dreams of those theologians who talk about love by distinguishing the outward works from the inward favor, saying: Love is an inward favor that loves the neighbor by wishing the neighbor well, but the works they call the fruit of love, etc. Let go of this! Here you see that St. Paul calls love not only favor but favorable benefit, so that faith and the person remain the doer and fulfiller of the law, as he says: “He who loves the other has fulfilled the law,” while love is the deed and the fulfillment, as he also says: “Love is the fulfillment of the law.”

Another question arises: How is love of the neighbor fulfillment of the law, although we are to love God above all things, even above the neighbor? Answer: Christ himself resolved this issue when he said in Matthew 22:39 that the second commandment requiring love of the neighbor is like the first requiring love of God. He thereby made the love of God and the love of the neighbor the same love. He does so for the following two reasons: First, God does not need our works and benefits but has directed us to do them to the neighbor, so that we might do to the neighbor what we want to do to God. God only needs that we believe in him and consider him to be God. For even preaching God’s glory, praising, and thanking him happens on earth so that the neighbor may be converted and brought to God in this way. Nonetheless, all this is called the love of God and is done out of love to God, but it is done only to be useful and beneficial for the neighbor.

The second reason is that God has turned the world into a fool. God henceforth also wants to be loved under the cross and in misery, as St. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1:21: “Because the world by its wisdom did not know God in his wisdom, it pleased God to save the believers by foolish preaching.” This is also why he gave himself into death and misery on the cross and imposed the cross on all who are his. As a result, those who did not want to love God before, when he gave them food, drink, possessions, and honor, must now love him in hunger and sadness, in misfortune and harm, so that all the works of love are to be directed at the miserable, needy neighbor. Those who want to do good to God are to find and love God there; there one is to serve him and do good to him. Thus, the commandment concerning the love of God is completely drawn into the love of the neighbor.

This is said to fend off and shut up the slippery and fickle spirits who seek God only in great and glorious things, seek his greatness and drill through heaven, thinking that they serve and love him in such honorable matters. But they miss God and let him pass them by in the neighbor here on earth in whom God wants to be loved and honored. This is why they will hear on the Last

Day, Matthew 25:42: “I was hungry, and you have not given me anything to eat” etc. For this was why he emptied himself of his divine form and took on the form of a servant, so that he might draw down our love toward him and attach it to the neighbor. But we let the neighbor here on earth lie, while we stare up into heaven and want to claim how greatly we love and serve God.

For that which is said: You shall not commit adultery; you shall not murder; you shall not steal; you shall not give false testimony; you shall not covet, and if there is any other commandment—all this is comprehended in this word: You shall love the neighbor as yourself.

We have sufficiently discussed how love is the main part of all laws in that it is the summary of all such laws. Because it considers nothing besides being useful to the neighbor and doing the neighbor no harm, love nicely learns how to be useful and do no harm from observing how people love themselves, how they are useful and do no harm to themselves. This is what love does to the other person. This is why we now want to discuss this commandment and see how masterfully and perfectly it is put.

The commandment shows four things. First, the person who is to love, saying: “You yourself shall love,” that is, the best, closest, and noblest person one may get to do the work. For no one may fulfill God’s law for somebody else; each person must fulfill it for himself, as St. Paul says in Galatians 6:5: “Each one will bear his own load;” 2 Corinthians 5:10: “We all must stand before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive in his body, as he deserves, whether good or bad.” This is why the commandment says: You, you, you shall love. It does not say: Let somebody else love in your place. For although one may pray to God for the other, asking that God be gracious to him and help him, no one will be saved, unless he has fulfilled God’s commandment for himself. Thus, one should pray for someone else not only that he may remain unpunished, as the letters of indulgence allege. Rather, one should pray that the other may become good and keep God’s commandment.

The second part of this commandment is the noblest virtue, namely, love itself. For he does not say: You shall give food and drink to your neighbor, clothe him, etc., although these too are precious, good works. Rather, he says: “You shall love him.” Love, however, is the head, fountain, and common virtue of all virtues. Love gives food and drink, clothes, comforts, prays, releases, helps, and rescues. What is there to say? Look, the one who loves gives himself with body and life, with property and honor, with all his strength, inwardly and outwardly to address the needs and to be of benefit to the neighbor, both friend and foe. Love does not hold anything back when it comes to serving the other. This is why no virtue is like it. And it is not possible to identify a particular work for love, as is done with the other, partial virtues, such as chastity, mercy, patience, meekness, etc. Love does everything and endures everything in death and life, even for the enemy. Indeed, St. Paul puts it well when he says that all commandments are comprehended in this word as in a summary: Love your neighbor.

The third part of this commandment is the noblest workshop and the most precious friend who is to be loved, namely, the neighbor. St. Paul does not say: You shall love the rich, the powerful, the learned, the saints. No, free love and the most perfect commandment does not divide itself into several people like this, as there is no favoritism. For this is what the world’s false carnal love

does, as it is all about playing favorites and loves only as long as it derives benefits from the other or has hope for such benefits. But where the benefits and hope are over, carnal love is also over. But this commandment demands free love toward everyone, regardless of who he is, whether he be friend or foe. For love does not seek its own benefit or good but gives benefits and does good. This is why love is most active and mighty among the poor, needy, evil, sinners, fools, sick, and enemies. For among these, love finds plenty to endure, suffer, bear, serve, and do good in all places and at all times.

And let us realize here how this commandment makes us all equals before God, and how it abrogates all difference among stations in life, among persons, among offices, and among works. For because the commandment is given to each and every person, a king and a prince (if he is a person) must confess that the poorest beggar and leper is his neighbor and nothing less before God. As a result, the king not only owes to help him but also, according to this commandment, owes to serve him with everything he has and is able to do. For if he is to love him, as God here commands, it follows that he is to love the beggar more than his crown and entire kingdom. Indeed, if the beggar needed it, the king should give his life for him. For the king owes the beggar love and must let the beggar be his neighbor.

Now, is this not a pretty, noble commandment that makes such unequal persons equal in such a nice way? Is it not an amazing comfort that beggars have such lordly servants and lovers that a rich king must serve them in their poverty? That such a beautiful crown and sweet aroma of royal splendor must be subject to the beggar's odor and wounds? How amazing would it be if we saw kings and princes, queens and princesses serve poor beggars and lepers, as we can read about St. Elisabeth? And even if that happened, it would be quite a small thing compared to Christ. For he set the example and commandment so high that no one will ever do what he did. For he is King of glory above all kings. Indeed, he is God's own Son. Still, he makes himself equal to the worst sinners, serves them to the point of dying for them. If ten kings served a beggar this way, it would be a big deal. But what would it be compared to Christ's service? They would have to be ashamed and say that what they did would not be worth considering.

From this you can see what the world is, how far it is not only from Christ's example, which is immeasurable, but also from this commandment. Where are those who know and understand what this little word "neighbor" means, as the natural law, just like this commandment, is also written into the heart of all people? For there is no one who does not feel and does not have to confess that it is right and true when the natural law says in Matthew 7:12: What you want done and left undone to you, this do and leave undone to another. This light lives and shines in the reason of all people. And if they wanted to look at it, what need would they have of any books, teachers, or any law? Here they carry a living book with them in the depth of their heart which would sufficiently tell them everything they should do, leave undone, judge, accept, and reject. "Love your neighbor as yourself" means the same as "What you want done to you." For everyone feels that he wants to be loved and not hated. And so everyone feels and sees that he owes the same to another person. But this is what it means to love the other as yourself. But evil lust and love darken such light, blinding people so that they do not look at this book in their hearts and do not follow such clear commandment of reason. This is why they must be fended

off and driven back by external commandments, books, the sword, and force. They must be reminded of their natural light. They must be made to look at their own heart. Yet it does not help, as they still do not see this light because evil lust prevents them from paying attention to it. But, coerced from the outside by sword and law, they must nonetheless abstain from evil deeds.

The fourth part of the commandment is the noblest example or paradigm. For teachings and commandments are outstanding when they also provide examples. This commandment gives a pretty lively example, namely, you yourself. This example is nobler than the example of all the saints. For the saints are past and now dead, but this example lives without ceasing. For everyone will have to confess that he feels how he loves himself. Indeed, he feels how strongly he cares for his life; how diligently he provides for his body by food, clothing, and all goods; how he flees death and avoids all misfortune. Well, what you see and feel here is the love of yourself. What does this commandment therefore teach you? It teaches you to do what you do to yourself, that the neighbor's body and life should be worth to you as much as your own body and life. See, how could he have given you an example that is closer to you, more alive, and more powerful, an example that is so deeply within you, an example that you yourself are—an example that is as deeply within you as the commandment that is written in your heart?

Now, how will you fare before God if you do not love your neighbor? You will be condemned by your own conscience that finds this commandment written within it. Your entire life will testify as an example against you that you have not done to the other as your own life so powerfully taught you, more than the example of all the saints. Alas, how will it be especially for those spiritual leaders who focus all their efforts on their chanting and praying, their vestments and tonsures, their masses and similar snow jobs! I will pass over in silence how they never keep this commandment. I will say this: Given all the busywork they do in the monastery, when do they have time and space to consider just once this commandment within their hearts and to become aware just once of the example of their own body? When do they even read about it in books, when do they hear it preached? Oh, the poor, miserable people! Do you think that God—for the sake of your vestments and tonsure—will ignore this commandment of his which he has written so deeply and brightly into your heart, which he has so neatly and clearly presented by the example of your own body, and which he has additionally put before you in so many external writings and words? Do you think that God will instead pay attention to what you have invented and done in the meantime?

Alas, how has the world so shamefully turned away from this fine, powerful commandment in which the person, the work, the example, and the workshop are presented so masterfully, doing instead the gruesome opposite of what this commandment teaches! For it is now the custom and entire way of life that we have paid for other people in our place: Monks and priests are supposed to be good and pray in our stead, just so that our person does not need to get engaged. We have replaced the noblest virtue, love, with works we have invented ourselves. We have replaced the neighbor with wood and stone, clothing and food, as well as the dead souls of the saints in heaven. We serve these things. We deal with these things. They are the workshop where we do what we have chosen to do. Instead of the noblest example, we study the legends and works of the saints. We imitate the outward examples but ignore what our own body and life

presents to us and what God's commandment sets before us, although the latter give us more to follow and practice than we could ever do. Indeed, even if we could do all this, we would never become like Christ.

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

Because the Ten Commandments prohibit harming and damaging the neighbor by saying: "You shall not kill; you shall not commit adultery," etc., the apostle follows the same manner of speaking and says that love keeps these commandments and does no harm to the neighbor. But love does not only do no harm to the neighbor; love also benefits everyone. For this too means harming the neighbor when I, if I can help him, leave my neighbor stuck in his trouble, even if I did not get him into his trouble. For if he is hungry and I do not feed him although I could feed him, it is the same as if I let him die, and ordered him to die, of hunger. This applies to every injury and harm of the neighbor. We have heard above how love is the fulfillment of the law.