

“God’s Student Handbook”

Exodus 12:1-14 & Romans 13:8-14

Rev. James Ramsey ~ September 7, 2014 ~ Rally Day

Many of our children and youth returned to school this week.



Some have been in school for several weeks. New ninth graders at Deer Lakes High School began by reviewing the Student Handbook. My son, Ben, is one of those new ninth graders. Ben was told that Handbook is important, that he should have it with him at all times –



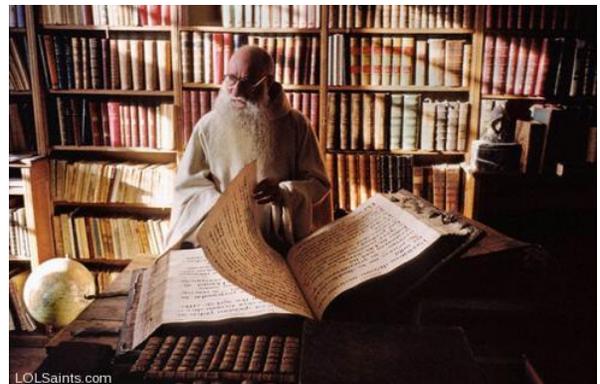
especially since passes for the bathroom can be found in the back! Glancing myself at Ben’s Handbook, I had to get my bifocals. The writing is extremely small and the first 64 pages are densely packed with information on such things as: Attendance Polices, Parking Permits, Bus Regulations, Cheating, Co-Curricular Rules, Discipline Policy, Elevator Procedure, Safe-Conduct Regulations...



Today is Rally Day at Church.

Since we begin the fall season of Christian Education, perhaps we, too, should review policies and procedures! We concentrate on the important work of teaching and learning the faith. We will focus on the Bible. Some think of God’s Word

as a kind of Student Handbook – and they imagine it the way I found Ben’s – too many pages densely-packed with small writing! Some believe the Bible too complex and keep it around only because they assume it must contain some kind of important pass.



If you want to think of the Bible as God’s student handbook, make sure you highlight Romans 13. It is here the Apostle Paul makes the case that we owe no one anything, except to love one another. Sure there are a bunch of commandments,

directing us on how we must behave as God's people. But Paul insists that as long as we are acting out of love -- we will naturally and necessarily be following all the commandments. The Apostle begins with the language of debt.

We are not to be indebted, except in the matter of love.



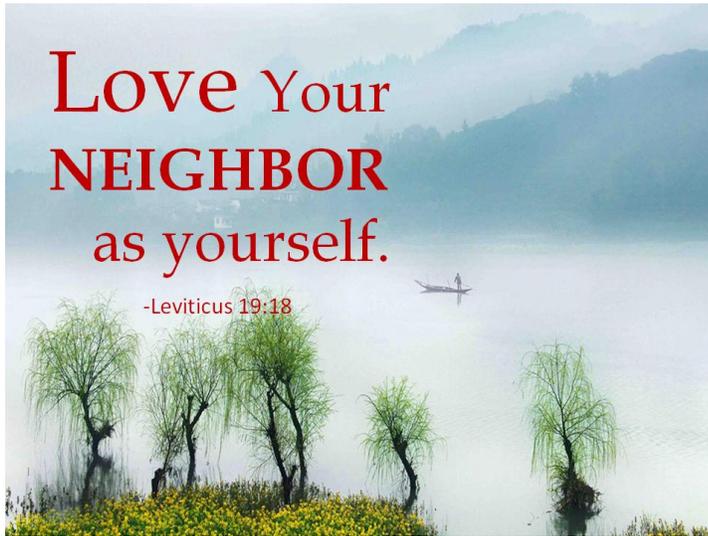
Now debt is something we can understand. We owe something to everybody it seems! As soon as we pay what we owe the phone company, the electric bill arrives. As soon as we pay what we owe the gas company, the cable bill arrives. As soon as we pay what we owe the bank for the mortgage payment, the MasterCard bill arrives. We owe something to everybody!

I used to be in a Clergy Bible Study with several Methodist pastors. They told me of a series of questions they were required to answer in the process of being ordained. Every Methodist pastor of the last 250 years has answered the same set of 17 questions -- questions that John Wesley himself asked of all his ministers. One of those core questions is this: "Are you earnestly striving after perfection in love?" John Wesley was well-acquainted with Romans 13, with the whole of scripture. He also understood practical, every-day life.



My Methodist colleagues joked that it was Question 16 which sought to trick would-be pastors. "Are you in debt so as to embarrass yourself in your work?" Of course, they almost always ask this of brand new pastors who are fresh out of seminary and often have substantial student loans! So it can be a tough one to answer. The running joke among Methodists is that when the bishop asks Question #16, the proper answer is simply, "I don't embarrass easily!"

Owe no one anything ... except to love one another. The commandments... are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself."



It's an ancient teaching – echoed again and again in scripture.

For the Apostle Paul, as it was for Jesus, the primary answer to any problem one might encounter is love. Paul echoes Jesus, who preached that the greatest commandments are the love of God and neighbor. "On these two commandments," said Jesus, "hang all the law and the prophets"

(Matthew 22:40). Whatever the question might be for Christian behavior -- be it about eating, playing games, relationships, engagement with the world, about being the church -- the answer is love.

It's not an easy answer, of course, especially remembering that Jesus told us to love even our enemies. Paul writes to the church in Rome, which was struggling under the thumb of the emperor. The Roman world was hostile to Christians, but Paul says that the answer, even to questions of politics and civics, is love and respect, which he addressed earlier in the chapter. "Pay to all what is due them," says Paul, "taxes to who taxes are due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due." Even when confronted with the power and injustice of the world, the Christian's answer must be love.

Commandments to **Love God** and **Love Others**

- **"Love your neighbor as yourself"**
– Lev 19:18
- **Quoted often in the NT:**
 - Mark 12:31 & par.
 - Matt 5:43
 - Matt 19:19
 - Rom 13:9
 - Gal 5:14
 - James 2:8
 - Var. "love one another..."



It's not a squishy, meek kind of love that Paul's calling for, nor is it common sense, like something from a high school's student handbook. Rather, the kind of love that Paul's talking about is the love that forgives rather than retaliates; that promotes peace instead of conflict.

In fact, says the apostle, we need this shorthand answer of love for most questions because the time is running out.

"Besides this," Paul says, "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."



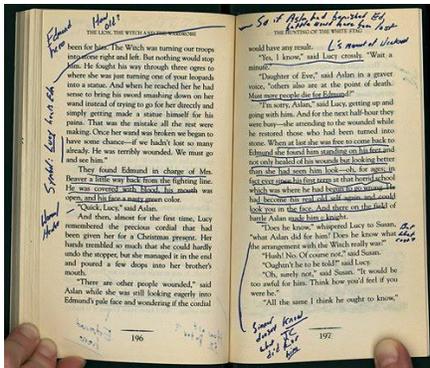
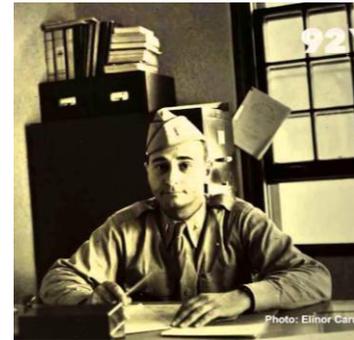
Like a student watching the clock while taking the SAT, Paul sees that the time is nearly up for the present world. The "day" of the Lord is close at hand.



We all agree with this notion of love. But sometimes our love is tested.

Do you know this story told by Max Lucado?

During World War II, a young serviceman struck up a "pen pal" relationship with a woman he had never met. Their correspondence had begun as a result of a book he had checked out of a public library. Its previous owner had penciled some notes into the margins of the book.



The insightfulness of the comments, the clues into the heart and soul these notes offered and the beauty of the handwriting inspired the lonely young man to seek out the woman whose name was written in the book.

The day after he wrote his introductory letter to her, he was shipped overseas. But for the next year, the two corresponded regularly and with increasing pleasure.

Though the man asked for a photograph, the woman declined. Still their feelings for each other grew.

Finally, it was time for the man to return to the States. He and his pen pal decided to meet. A 7 p.m. rendezvous was arranged in Grand Central Station. He would know her, she wrote, by the red rose she would be carrying.





Shortly after entering the station a tall, beautiful brunette in an emerald green dress sauntered by him. Almost magnetically, the lonely young man was drawn towards this woman and her alluring vitality and sensuality. She smiled a tiny inviting smile at him and even murmured, "Going my way, sailor?" as she strolled past.

But her spell over him was broken when he suddenly saw behind her a frumpily-dressed woman wearing glasses, an odd hat and carrying a red rose. His heart sank as he saw she was as plain as the brunette had been



stunning. She was fortyish, roundish, grayish, but with eyes that twinkled warmly in a gentle face. As the brunette walked away, the young man resolutely turned his back on her beauty and strode to the simple woman carrying the red rose. Looking at her, he faced the disappointing realization that this relationship would be different than he imagined. Yet he was buoyed by the memories of their letters and the prospect of having a new lifelong friend - one whose wit and intellect he already knew from all their correspondence.

The young man introduced himself and suggested they go out for dinner. But the woman just smiled with amusement and told him, "I don't know what this is about, but the young lady in the green dress who just went by begged me to carry this rose. And she said if you were to ask me out to dinner, I should tell you she is waiting for you in the big restaurant across the street. She said it was some kind of test."



If we are going to be effective for God, our love must pass the test. It must be true, persistent, and unwavering. If you would follow Christ, tweet yourself – Love your neighbor!

Whatever you are faced with this week...no matter what questions and conundrums confront you...we can be confident that Paul's summary of God's Student Handbook will suffice.

- What's the right thing when your boss treats you unfairly?

- What's the proper response when your friend gets the promotion you thought you deserved?



- How do you deal with a nasty neighbor who won't give you the time of day?

- What do you do about the fact that there are just some people you don't like?



- What do you do with a problem in your primary relationship?

- How do you treat people who are different from you?

- Do you struggle with self-esteem, cultural acceptance, or your health?

~ No easy answers, but they begin with love -- unconditional, willful, sacrificial, Christ-like love.



In the end, Love is the answer to everything.

Love your neighbor, change the world...
It starts with you. It starts today.