**Final Exegesis Paper: Romans 13:8-14 (due Sep 2)**

*We were baptized and all anxiety for our past life vanished away.*

- Augustine, 387CE

Believers are persuaded that the power of Christ’s gospel is undiminished since Augustine was converted more than 1,600 years ago by Paul’s exhortation to awaken to the dawning of God’s new eschatological day. Therefore, Christians should be motivated to live ethically not only by the claim of *agapē* but also by the approaching eschaton. Romans 13:8-14 powerfully declares that love not only binds together Gentile and Jewish Christians in the present time, but it also meets the obligations of the past and the future new age. This is unequivocally good news for Paul. This paper hopes further to illumine this observation through literary and historical exploration and perhaps unlocking more of Paul's intentions and his motivations for writing. This love-claim has implications, of course, for both the Roman church and for us, given that salvation is arguably nearer to us now than it ever was for the first hearers of these words.

To set Rom. 13:8-17 in its literary context, the passage belongs to what Raymond E. Brown calls the “hortatory”[[1]](#footnote-1) part of the letter. An apt descriptor, given presumably for the apocalyptic exhortations in Rom. 12:1-2 and Rom. 13:11-14 that bookend this section. This grouping of chapters 12 and 13 has led many commentators, including John Howard Yoder, to insist that the chapters should be read together in to be completely understood.[[2]](#footnote-2) Since this paper’s focus is on the final two paragraphs of chapter 13 and composed of two distinct parts v.8-10 and v.11-14, I will be dealing with them sequentially, exploring the first the literary and historical contexts, and finally, theological considerations.

Brown notes how striking harmonious the words of Paul are in v.8-10 with the broader Jesus tradition.[[3]](#footnote-3) This is more than a thematic consistency for Paul, which ought not to be a surprise given the writer’s salutatory claim to be “a servant of Jesus Christ” (Rom. 1:1) This is the heart of the good news for Paul. Verse 8 begins both with a double negative in Greek[[4]](#footnote-4) and a linguistic bridge to verse 7.[[5]](#footnote-5) The terminological connection creates a link that otherwise would, as Cobb and Lull suggest, make the transition to discussing love after the *excursus* on Christians and the government, as “odd.”[[6]](#footnote-6) As it stands, however, after urging Christians to pay the taxes they owe to the statement, he employs the same idea of obligation to the Christian duty to love one another. The verb “to owe,” used in the imperative here, is used again by Paul in Rom 15:1, 27. First, as the obligation of the strong to the weak. Then as the obligation of the Gentile churches in Macedonia and Achaia to the Jewish churches in Jerusalem. This language is clearly understood by the apostle to be not just relevant since it uses a familiar socio-cultural reality as its frame of reference, but it is also persuasive. Paul is fully aware of the “expectations and pitfalls of reciprocity obligations” [[7]](#footnote-7) operational in the patronage system of the Mediterranean in the first century. This is a historically relevant theological move by Paul. One commentator further illumines Paul’s meaning to the Roman Christians: “Their former social obligations are to be replaced by a single new obligation to meet the needs of fellow members in the church.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

Of note in v.8 is the direct objects of the verb *agapē*. First *to allelous* “one another,” and then *ton heteron* “the other.”[[9]](#footnote-9) The grammatical construction here signals that Paul is not merely urging the Roman church to mutual love within their community, although that is arguably a central motivation for his writing. The expression *ton heteron* must refer to those outside the Christian community.[[10]](#footnote-10) It is clear that Paul understands Christian love to be “other-directed”[[11]](#footnote-11) and outward facing as well as an inward. As in 12:9-21, love in understand by our writer as a concrete reality, specifically a summation and fulfillment of the law, not simply an emotion stimulated by affection or preference.

The issues regarding law-observance versus nonobservance take a backseat when Paul turns to consider how the law is *pepleroken*,from the verb *pleroo* (v.8, 10) “to make full,”[[12]](#footnote-12) “to complete,” “to perfect, consummate,” “to carry through to the end,” “to carry into effect, bring into realization,” and finally “to universally and absolutely cause God’s will (as made known in the law) to be obeyed as it should, and God’s promises (given through the prophets) to receive fulfillment.”[[13]](#footnote-13) Therefore, the question becomes, does Paul understand there to be continuity or discontinuity between Christ and the Law? However, that issue doesn’t appear to be wholly clarified in the following verses.

Moving on to verse 9, we quickly notice that Paul continue to fall lock-step with Jesus, who cites the same half of the love commandment (Mar. 12:31; Matt. 5:43, 22:39; Luke 10:27); and in Luke 18:20 summarizes the law with the “same four commandments in the same order.”[[14]](#footnote-14) However, Jewett suggests that Paul’s reference to these particular four commandments may be more than simply a representative selection from the Decalogue and may provide a link to the historical and social context in Rome.[[15]](#footnote-15) It is of note that the ordering of the commandments in verse 9 appear to come from Deut. 5:17-21 in the LXX and not Exod. 20:13-17. It remains unclear why both Jesus and Paul omit the prohibition to “bear false witness” (Deut. 5:20 and Exod. 20:16). The final verse of this first part reinforces the opening statement in v. 8, reemphasizing that love fulfills the law simply by doing no wrong to a neighbor.

The project of summing up the Torah in a single phrase has a long history in Judaism, of which Paul was no doubt aware.[[16]](#footnote-16) What is unique about Paul is that he applies this long Jewish tradition to the expanding Christian movement. As a result, he and Jesus before him reference Lev. 19:18 explicitly as a single fundamental principle for the Jesus-community.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Verse 11 shifts to imagery typical of apocalyptic writings of the Old and New Testament, and the central picture controlling the entire paragraph is ­a person awakening from sleep at dawn.[[18]](#footnote-18) This picture is beautiful and deeply emotive. Although there is an underlying sense of urgency, there is a gentleness to it. Conjuring up, not frightening imagery, but hopeful and expectance. Greathouse shares Brendan Byrne’s notion that v.11-12 appear to be a “baptismal hymn,”[[19]](#footnote-19) interpreting the verb to ‘put on’ (*endysōmetha*) used in both v.12 and v.14 is evidence. He cites M. J. Lagrange in James D. G. Dunn’s commentary, who informs us that “the imagery of putting off/putting on was common in earliest Christian parenesis…perhaps reflecting a widespread pattern of exhorting new converts and baptisands.”[[20]](#footnote-20)

A look at the grammatical construction of v.11 reveals it is the aorist tense for the verb *egerthēnai/egeiro* “to waken” or “to be raised” and *episteusamen/pisteuo* “to believe” or “to exercise faith” that is used. One commentator remarks that the case may be significant because it draws our attention to a particular understanding of salvation.[[21]](#footnote-21) In verse 11, Paul uses the aorist to acknowledge that salvation has been attained in Christ, that it is a past and completed action. However, the limitations of our own mortality mean that his readers and hearers must pay special attention to the point at which our transformation began.[[22]](#footnote-22)

In verse 12, night and day imagery subtly shifts to darkness and light[[23]](#footnote-23) and we find ourselves in a mixed metaphor demanding our action. Namely, “laying aside” something and “putting on” something else. Many English translations render *hopla* “armor,” but “the word properly denotes military equipment, not primarily clothing.”[[24]](#footnote-24) If *hopla* is indeed best understood as “armor,” as so many English translators would have it, then it figuratively represents protection and defense. Whereas, if we understand *hopla* to be a “weapon” or “instrument of war,” even in the figurative sense, we get a very different functional metaphor representing a more offensive posture, ready for attack. Gaventa does not go into great depth on this point but nevertheless explains that Christians who were once God’s enemies, now “have their place as ‘weapons’ in God’s battle, which means they endeavor to find their place in God’s conflict.”[[25]](#footnote-25) Greathouse concurs, Christians are to “become [God’s] weapons in final eschatological battle.”[[26]](#footnote-26)

The three pairs of shameful vices that are to be laid aside in order to live honorable lives are attractively translated as a set of hendiadyses by James D. G. Dunn.[[27]](#footnote-27) Thus, the verse would read, “let us live honorably as in the day, not in drunken revelry, debauched sexual excess, and jealous infighting.” Paul does not hesitate to call his audience to observe his day’s conventional respectability. As one commentator writes, “Christian morality is not necessarily always countercultural, but it is always appropriate to God’s new age that is dawning.”[[28]](#footnote-28) This seems to accurately articulate Paul’s central aim in this verse.

The last and positive command to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ,” ends this section yet isn’t explained by Paul, so though attractive, is left relatively opaque to contemporary readers.[[29]](#footnote-29) The Lord Jesus Christ has become the “personification of ‘the weapons of light’ in v.12.”[[30]](#footnote-30) Paul seems to be referring to humanity’s transformation as it enters into the new day that God has inaugurated in Christ.[[31]](#footnote-31) As we are progressively being transformed, we ought to no longer “make plans,”[[32]](#footnote-32) as Greathouse suggests for *pronoian mē poieisthe*, “to look to satisfy” the whims and fancies of the body. Inside, as we can elucidate from Rom 14:1-15:13 that follows, we are to live in a way that leads to the flourishing of life within a new community fit for this new age.[[33]](#footnote-33)

As Edward’s states, “the law is *fulfilled* and *summed up* in love, for love penetrates to the intent of the law and thereby exceeds the outward minimum prescribed by the commandments.”[[34]](#footnote-34) Not only is this statement true for Romans 13:8-10, but it remains the basis for Christian faithfulness in community with one another into the dawning age, heralded in v.11-14. The compelling logic of obligation that Paul employs to communicate to his first audience that love discharges one’s outstanding debt to fellow creature and Creator,[[35]](#footnote-35) remains compelling to a contemporary audience. Edwards follows the same logic, claiming that an “other person represents God’s claim on our love.”[[36]](#footnote-36) This is as true today as it was for the Roman church. “Paul recommended love rather than obligation alone as the basis for Christian community life.” [[37]](#footnote-37)

From a contemporary standpoint, Paul could be accused of being reductive or even simplistic in both his summation of what it takes to fulfill the law and live honorably in the present and the future. At that point, it is a good reminder to interrogate our modern conception of love. Edwards helpfully contrasts Christianity’s concept of love with the more abstract love Buddhism’s saying, *agapē* is “a will in search of an object.”[[38]](#footnote-38) The community-love and neighbor-love/other-love that Paul speaks of in this passage affirms this assertion. It is rooted in the concrete experience of living in community. The daily practice of love transforms the believer, readying them for God’s new eschatological day.

Love as a will, as opposed to an emotion is shared by N. T. Wright. He reflects, “The love of which Paul speaks is tough…in the sense that, since it does not spring from the emotions but from the will, love will grit its teeth and act as if the emotions are in place, trusting that they will follow in good time,”[[39]](#footnote-39) adding “if we reduce ethics to emotions, we lose not only consistency of behavior but also the very possibility of moral discourse.”[[40]](#footnote-40) Wright has articulated so succinctly the idea that not only ties v.8-10 with v.11-14, but also with the preceding chapter, 12:9-21. Love is not a feeling but a concrete good, forming the basis of Christian community life and discipleship.

This paper began with an observation that Paul’s imperative to love encompasses and addresses the challenges of the diverse Jesus-community in Rome, mainly due to disagreement regarding law-observance. Still, it also reaches back into the past and reaches forward into the dawning age. The complex patronage system of social obligation within the highly stratified society first century provided Paul a helpful vehicle to get across his point. The explanatory words of James R. Edwards prove timeless stating, an “other person represents God’s claim on our love.”[[41]](#footnote-41) So, although modern Western economic patterns have fundamentally replaced the patronage system the temptations of easy credit are no less dangerous than those of the patronage system, within which Paul advised in Rom. 13:8, “Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another.” Contemporary readers of Romans, therefore, must ask themselves, has a love of money, self-absorption, and consumption replaced love as the motivating principle of our communities of faith? For if love, within our churches and toward others, has been usurped as our motivating and foundational principle, then Paul would likely warn us in the sharpest terms that we are not ready for the new age. We stubbornly remain in the darkness of the night that is passing, unwilling to awaken to God’s dawning new day.

1. Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, ed. Marion L. Soards, The Abridged Edition (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), 202. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. William M. Greathouse, *Romans 9-16: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*, ed. George Lyons, New Beacon Bible Commentary (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 2008), 184. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 207. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. James R. Edwards, *Romans*, Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1992), 311. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. William M. Greathouse, *Romans 9-16*, 184. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. John B. Cobb, Jr. and David J. Lull, *Romans*, Chalice Commentaries for Today (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2005), 173. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. William M. Greathouse, *Romans 9-16*, 185. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. William M. Greathouse, 185. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. William M. Greathouse, *Romans 9-16*, 185. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. William M. Greathouse, 185. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Harold W. Attridge, ed., *The HarperCollins Study Bible: Full Revised and Updated (NRSV) With the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*, Student Edition (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFranciso, 2006), note for 13:8-10 on p.2029. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Joseph H. Thayer, *Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Coded with Strong’s Concordance Numbers* (Rockford, IL: PMA Publishing, 2015), 517. **G**4137, 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Joseph H. Thayer, 518. **G**4137, 2, a, b (α, β, γ,) c, (γ,). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. John B. Cobb, Jr. and David J. Lull, *Romans*, 173. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Robert Jewett, *Roman: A Commentary (Hermeneia)*,2007 quoted by William M. Greathouse, 188. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. N. T. Wright, “Romans,” vol. Vol IX, The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2015), 625. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. William M. Greathouse, *Romans 9-16*, 188. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. William M. Greathouse, 193. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. William M. Greathouse, 192, 194, 195, 196. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. William M. Greathouse, 196. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. William M. Greathouse, 194. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Bill Mounce, “The Aorist Is so Much More than a Past Tense,” *Bill Mounce: For an Informed Love of God* (blog), February 23, 2017, https://www.billmounce.com/monday-with-mounce/the-aorist-so-much-more-past-tense. Accessed 08/29/2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. William M. Greathouse, *Romans 9-16*, 196. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. N. T. Wright, “Romans,” 628. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *When in Romans: An Invitation to Linger with the Gospel According to Paul* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 102. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. William M. Greathouse, *Romans 9-16*, 196. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. William M. Greathouse, *Romans 9-16*, 198. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. William M. Greathouse, 196. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. N. T. Wright, “Romans,” 630. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. N. T. Wright, “Romans,” 629. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. William M. Greathouse, *Romans 9-16*, 199. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. William M. Greathouse, *Romans 9-16*, 199. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. William M. Greathouse, 200. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. James R. Edwards, *Romans*, 312. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. N. T. Wright, “Romans,” 625. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. James R. Edwards, *Romans*, 311. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. William M. Greathouse, *Romans 9-16*, 185. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. James R. Edwards, *Romans*, 311. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. N. T. Wright, “Romans,” 626. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. N. T. Wright, 626. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. James R. Edwards, *Romans*, 311. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)