

# A Law to occupy you

Imagine if a country passed a law that all its citizens must love each other! It would look a little different to our world, would it not? It sounds like something out of some utopian dream. In fact, Plato in his *Laws*, imagined a country called Magnesia that strived for this ideal. Believe it or not, Christians are citizens of such a “country”, more accurately a Kingdom, where such a law exists. Almost in every book of the New Testament, Christians have been given a command to love people. “Love one another.” “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” “Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another”. Such citizens, you would hope, would comply with the law, and prove the golden rule.

## Icebreaker



Construct a mythical utopia [ideal place] in your mind, and choose a name for your dreamland. What would you have as its outstanding feature? Share your utopian dreams around the group, and vote for the best name and concept. Do you think there’s any chance that your dream might ever come true?

## Read: Romans 12:9-21

<sup>9</sup> Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. <sup>10</sup> Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honour one another above yourselves. <sup>11</sup> Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord. <sup>12</sup> Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. <sup>13</sup> Share with God’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

<sup>14</sup> Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. <sup>15</sup> Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. <sup>16</sup> Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. <sup>17</sup> Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. <sup>18</sup> If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. <sup>19</sup> Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord. <sup>20</sup> On the contrary:

*“If your enemy is hungry, feed him;  
if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.  
In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.”*

<sup>21</sup> Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

## Introduction

In this famous letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul spends the first eleven chapters outlining the way to be saved, namely through faith in the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. In the chapters that follow (12-16), he describes the sort of life that is consistent with such saving faith. And it is no surprise that the life that he describes is one of love.

It is helpful to recognize in the sequence and arrangement of these chapters, that this command to love (chapters 12-16) follows on from the act and fact of salvation (chapters 1-11), not the other way round. In other words, this law of love is given to us not to justify us, but to occupy us.



### Question 1

Is the so-called Golden Rule (“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” – Luke 6:31) the best place to start when considering the Christian Faith? What would you say to an enquirer who wishes to begin the discussion there?

### Question 2

(v9) The Bible has many examples of people whose love is sincere, and of people whose love is not. In the Book of Acts, Luke records two such people, Barnabas and Ananias, who on appearance did the same thing, namely selling a piece of land and giving the proceeds to the apostles for distribution to the poor in the church (Acts 4:36-5:1ff). Can you think of any others in the Bible whose “loves” stand in contrast?

### Question 3

(v9-16) Paul instructs that our love should be active and not merely stored up. From these verses, what is the command that you find most challenging? (If you have listened to the sermon that goes with this study, would you say that your love needs to be more of the kinetic kind?)

### Case Study 1

Jerry thinks that all Christians are hypocrites. In fact he’s thrown out the challenge to his Christian friends that if they can show him the perfect Church, he will gladly sign up to become a member. But he’s quietly confident that he will be spending his precious Sunday mornings tucked up in bed. How can we help our friend Jerry?



### Question 4

It is said that: *“To return evil for evil is human. To return evil for good is devilish. But to return good for evil is Christian.”*

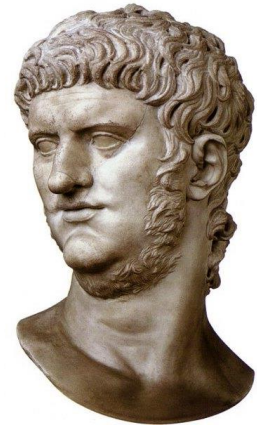
Is it possible for a Christian to show such radical love? How?

Have you ever met someone who has loved (or hated) like this?

Can you think of any characters in the Bible who, with reference to the maxim above, displayed this (a) human ‘tit-for-tat’? (b) devilish cruelty? (c) exceptional love?

## Question 5

The Book of Hebrews is thought to be a 'sermon' written to encourage and counsel Jewish Christians living in Rome to stand fast in their faith during days of persecution. (See Hebrews 10:32-39). In fact, it seems that all the Christians in Rome suffered persecution during the reign of Emperor Nero. On 19-27 July 64, Rome was destroyed by a great fire. The emperor Nero was blamed by the Roman populace, but he in turn blamed the Christians. The Roman historian Tacitus explains what happened (*Annals 15:44*):



But all human efforts, all the lavish gifts of the emperor, and the propitiations of the gods, did not banish the sinister belief that the conflagration [fire] was the result of an order.

Consequently, to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judæa, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their centre and become popular. Accordingly, an arrest was first made of all who pleaded guilty; then, upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of firing the city, as of hatred against mankind.

Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired. Nero offered his gardens for the spectacle, and was exhibiting a show in the circus, while he mingled with the people in the dress of a charioteer or stood aloft on a car. Hence, even for criminals who deserved extreme and exemplary punishment, there arose a feeling of compassion; for it was not, as it seemed, for the public good, but to glut one man's cruelty, that they were being destroyed.

Imagine a believer during these awful days of persecution reading this passage from Paul's letter (Romans 12:17-21). What would you be thinking if you were them?

## Read: Romans 13:8-10

<sup>8</sup> Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law. <sup>9</sup> 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 neighbour as yourself." <sup>10</sup> Love does no harm to a neighbour. Therefore love is the fulfilment of the law.

## Question 6

What point do you think Paul is making in these verses? Does he mean:

- (A) That Christians always morally satisfy the law of God?
- (B) That Christians no longer need the Ten Commandments, because they've been replaced by the law of love?
- (C) That Christians, by engaging in a life of love, show that they understand the meaning of the law, namely that it is about doing good to others.
- (D) None of the above.

## Case Study 2

Wes is currently living with his girlfriend and loves her very much. He also meets weekly with his Bible Study group, where he has been the leader for several years. One of the group members, Ted, wonders if there is some inconsistency in this arrangement, but Wes assures him that the Bible teaches us to love one another, and that we are not to be judgemental. Ted further wonders if the seventh commandment is to be taken seriously, but Wes assures him that the Ten Commandments no longer apply. How would you sort out this anomaly?

## Aphrodite

According to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, "Aphrodite (pronounced 'afro-dight-tee) was the ancient Greek goddess of sexual love and beauty, identified with Venus by the Romans. The Greek word *aphros* means "foam," and Hesiod relates in his *Theogony* [a *Theogony* is a system of divinity] that Aphrodite was born from the white foam produced by the severed genitals of Uranus (Heaven), after his son Cronus threw them into the sea." .....Whew!!



Aphrodite was the goddess who dominated the life and culture of the city of Corinth.

## Question 7

If it is true that worshippers resemble the god they worship, what might you suspect are some of the characteristic traits, values and attitudes of those Corinthians who worshipped Aphrodite?

What then makes Paul's famous definition of love (1 Cor 13) so daring and powerful?

*<sup>4</sup> Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. <sup>5</sup> It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. <sup>6</sup> Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. <sup>7</sup> It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. <sup>8</sup> Love never fails.*

## Prayer

Finish in prayer – thanking God for the quality and power of the love that He has put within us, and asking for grace to be wholly occupied with this love. Before you pray, reflect on these questions: Is there anyone you need to forgive today? Or to whom you need to show more kindness or forbearance? Perhaps your group leader could allow some time for silent prayer, before you begin to pray out loud as a group.