“***Fulfills the Law***” by S. Finlan, at The First Church, Dec. 8, 2019

**Isaiah 2:2–4**

2 In days to come the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it.

3Many peoples shall come and say, “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.” For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.

4 He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

**Romans 13:8–11**

8 Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. 9The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not ste al; You shall not covet”; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” 10Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law. 11Besides this, 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.

Isaiah speaks of God some day bringing peace. He makes it clear that this means that God loves *all* humanity, and wants to bring peace to Gentiles as well as to Jews. As a message about what God wants for humanity, it is very inspiring. Further, I think that when spiritual living becomes widespread, there will be a peacemaking effect. But do I expect God the Father to personally intervene in human history, and literally *impose* peace on humanity? I do not. Peace is *our* responsibility.

We have to *earn* peace by being far-sighted, responsible, and fair. I do not believe that God will intervene and install an international system that we have not earned. We humans have to create a structure for peaceful resolution of disputes between nations. Some of the peace processes that have been carried out have succeeded, for instance the peace between Egypt and Israel, and the peace between Catholics and Protestants in Ireland. Diplomacy is a long game, requiring focus, dedication, and wisdom. God will bless and support our efforts, but *we* have to do the work. The responsibility for war and peace lies in human hands. Responsibility is the moral lesson that I’m taking from this Scripture. Let us see if we come back to this theme later.

The other Scripture to look at today is from Paul’s letter to the Romans, and it does not focus mainly on responsibility, but on love. Paul lists most of the commandments, and then says “Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law” (v. 10). I think he is saying that the first point of the commandments is to do no wrong to a neighbor, but that needs to move on toward actively doing *good* to a neighbor. This is how love fulfills or completes the intention of the commandments. He says they “are summed up” in “love your neighbor” (13:9). Love builds upon the commandments and fulfills their purpose. Love takes morality a step further, by *doing* good, not just *refraining* from doing wrong.

We have a fascinating series of connections, from legal commands to moral behavior to love. The link between law and moral character has often been discussed, but love is usually not brought in to that conversation. However, Jesus had already done so, before Paul did. When Jesus was asked what was the greatest commandment, he said “you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and . . . mind” (Matt 22:37). And then he said “the second is like it: ‘you shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (22:39). When he says the second is *like* the first, Jesus is *linking* love toward God with love toward people. He exults these two love commandments, one from Deuteronomy and one from Leviticus, as greater than any other commandment, and he says that they naturally go together. If we are honest and loving toward God, it will be easier to love humans, even when it is hard to *like* them. People are not always sweet and lovely, but they have spiritual potential and value, and loving them can help bring out that potential. Love is not fundamentally a *feeling*, but a decision and a loyalty: a decision to value the *long-term* good of the other.

Parents are constantly taking actions that are aimed at the long-term good of their child, often something very different from the short-term desires of the child. Parental love and Godly love take the long view. Spiritual health and purpose are what matter the most.

When Paul says love fulfills the commandments, he is taking Jesus at his word, reminding us of Jesus’ saying, and then developing the idea. The commandments are fundamentally moral, having to do with not hurting, robbing, or lying. But ultimately our motive needs to be loving. We need to care about spiritual potential, to affirm the future life. Faith in the reality of eternal life is an essential part of Christian hope. Too many people have lost hope, both in an afterlife and in lasting value or meaning in *this* life.

There are more and more people around the world, and increasingly in America, who have lost hope. They have become cynical and despairing. Something has convinced them that everybody is a crook or a liar and that there is no truth—but that itself is a terrible LIE. It is the ideology of tyrants and gangsters. If they can convince you that everybody is a criminal, then *their* criminality looks normal. Do not buy into this message of hopelessness and cynicism. It is not necessarily bad that we live in a time of struggle and uncertainty, as long as we keep our grip on things that will endure.

We *can* act with love, we *can* pledge to do God’s will. It is a divine assignment—to bring a bit of heaven to earth by doing good to others. We can only do this if we have hope. There are many ways to do it, of course; we can make a kind remark, visit the sick, comfort the lonely, teach those who want to learn, and share our wealth in worthy ways.

The burden is upon us to fulfill the love command, not just the moral commandments. And this is where responsibility comes back in to our discussion. It is our responsibility to seek to fulfill the demand of love. We don’t have to be perfect. We don’t have to be St. Francis. But we are expected to take seriously our responsibility to practice these teachings. We should pray for help in learning how to love. Who can do this difficult love-work without spiritual help? We might need some *human* help, too, in the form of allies, co-workers, and teachers. We need friends and family who can be the initial targets, so to speak, for our love, and who can bear our fumbling or our mistakes. As we get better at it with our friends, we will get better at it with strangers, and “be wise as serpents and harmless as doves” (Matt 10:16).

You have the hope of glory in your hearts. You can also have hope that there *is* a way that people can live together in peace and fairness here in America. Love and truth and even law can be tested. We must remain loyal to every true principle, and show its spiritual power in our lives. I remain confident that truth will triumph in the end.