

Living in the Light – Romans 13:8-14

Rev. Matt Nieman

September 6, 2026

Laura and I watched a documentary this week on Netflix called “Death of the Pastor’s Wife.” It’s a provocative title, I know.

It tells the true story from just a few years back of a young pastor in South Carolina of a mid-size charismatic church. And one Sunday a young woman shows up at the church and demonstrates gifts for singing and worship leading. Pretty soon, she’s singing in the band. Then, she’s assisting the pastor in the crafting of the church service.

Things progress and all of a sudden both of them are divorcing their spouses and marrying each other.

And in this marriage, now front and center in this same congregation, the pastor takes control of her—not so much in public but in their private, married life. He abuses her emotionally, sexually, and spiritually—to the point where she’s so desperate and out of hope that, even after filing for divorce, she takes her own life (that’s what her death was ruled to be, although the woman’s family and friends have doubts that her husband didn’t have something directly to do with it).

It’s a terrible story of domestic abuse that at least indirectly led to tragedy. But it’s also a tale of how a preacher—as well as anybody with authority—is susceptible to getting drunk on their own power and using that power as leverage to control others.

Taking scripture and twisting it to justify their control, making fabulous claims from the pulpit about how wives need to act a certain way to make their husbands happy. And how a congregation endorsed this thinking and behavior by still allowing him to lead them.

And we wonder why the church and clergy today have a credibility problem.

It was a cautionary tale for me, certainly. And it's a cautionary tale really for all of us in whatever setting we're in or capacity we're serving in: Are we being faithful to our calling when it comes to how we behave and exhibit the traits of faithful disciples?

As people of faith in Jesus Christ, we have only one obligation. There are spiritual laws we are taught to obey, as found in the Ten Commandments. But they are boiled down to what the apostle Paul puts forth in Romans 13. "Owe no one anything, except to love one another." Love God and your neighbor.

There really are no obligations we have but to practice love—for the God who created us and others around us. And if we truly do love, following those commandments will fall in place. Indeed, Paul says that loving one another is the summary of all those commands.

When we love, we don't murder or steal or commit adultery. When we love, we don't lie, or covet, or take the Lord's name in vain. When we love, we don't take control of another's life as a way to build ourselves up and flex our perceived righteousness and superiority. When we love, we live honorably.

Love is the key. Now, if love were just a feeling one had toward another, loving would be so simple and, therefore, living honorably would be so simple. But as we all know, loving is not just having a feeling; it is intentional action. It takes effort; it takes work sometimes to truly love the way Paul and Jesus commands us to love.

What's the secret to a long, happy marriage? There are many factors, of course. Good health is always a key; so is wisely managing a number of challenges in your relationship that might come your way (like job loss, issues with children, and the like). However, as couples over the years who have surpassed their golden anniversaries have told me, one of the keys to a long, happy marriage is the willingness of both parties to work at their marriage. In other words, spouses must work at loving each other. To love means not just to feel, but to act in loving ways.

As hard as it is sometimes to act lovingly toward somebody we enjoy and like, it's even harder to love those whom we struggle to accept or whose actions really turn us off.

When we love—especially those hard to love—we “put on the Lord Jesus Christ,” as Paul claims in Romans 13. We throw off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.

What does that mean?

Yale theologian Miroslav Volf gained some insights into this question on a trip he took to his native Croatia. He and a friend went on a quest for some sausage, and their journey took them to the home of an old man in a distant village. When they entered his kitchen, they saw an open

Bible on the table, one that the man had clearly picked up and read.

The old man offered them some wine, and they started talking. Not about sausage, but about Christian life.

"Always choose a more difficult path," the old man said. A neighbor asked him to clarify what he meant, so he said, "It's easier for us to be served than to serve and to take than to give. Serving is the harder path, giving is the harder path. Because we are selfish, the path of love is always more difficult."

Miroslav Volf marveled at what was being said. He was amazed that they were having that kind of conversation, rather than just exchanging a few pleasantries about the weather or sports. Then he realized that if the Bible is on your kitchen table, then those sorts of conversations will happen. When you focus on Scripture, on a life of service, and on the path of love, then you are putting on Christ. It's then when we are the light.

Last Sunday, the Little League World Series concluded with the international team from Curacao defeating the American team from Henderson, Nevada. Final score: Curacao 11, Henderson 2.

As the game was winding down, Henderson coach Cory Edwards knew what was happening. He saw his players fighting off tears. He saw their sulking postures, the finger pointing, the coming to grips with the end of something special.

But he didn't want his players to go out all sullen. So while his team was a few more balls and strikes away from

losing, Edwards gathered his group and delivered a message that there is only one way to finish it out.

That message was captured by ESPN as they were televising the game. And it went viral afterward:

“Hey, listen, no matter what happens, you have to hold your head up. You have to not get on each other. You have to have good body language,” he said. “Those things are important. You have to stay mentally tough. When it gets tough, you get tougher.”

And in an interview afterward, the coach said, “Self-confidence is an interesting term, because it’s all about self and how you feel about yourself, but I think a lot of confidence comes from other people acknowledging the good things or the good work or the good person you are,” Edwards said. “If you can just get a little bit of light in there from somebody else, sometimes it uplifts you. I think in that moment, where it felt all negative, here are some positives.”

If you can just get a little bit of light in there... When we are the light, that light penetrates into the lives of others and makes a difference.

Since I’m in the business of recommending documentaries this morning, here’s another one I’d highly recommend. In the run-up to the 25th anniversary of 9-11 next week, there are many retrospectives that we can take in to remember the tragedy of that event.

Most of them will rightly reflect on the courage and sacrifices of the first responders who died that day. And we should never forget those heroic acts.

But there’s a new documentary that offers a different perspective. It’s called 9-11 Reunion. And it chronicles

different instances where total strangers that day ended up relying on each other or serving each other in order to survive. And the doc reunites these people with each other, in most cases for the first time since that terrible day 25 years ago.

There's the story, for example, of a woman scrambling to flee the destruction of the World Trade Center right after it happened and she's hit and severely injured by a piece of one of the airplanes that had fallen from the towers.

She's laying on the ground and, amid the chaos, a passerby comes to her rescue. He stops for her, picks her up in her very injured state, and gets the attention of a passing ambulance driver. The ambulance driver sees the man and this woman, stops, and transports her to the hospital. She was the first patient admitted to a hospital that day and she was the last 9-11 victim to leave. She spent 18 months in the hospital recovering.

And when they gathered for their reunion, she gets out of her wheelchair, walks to her rescuer, and emotionally breaks down with gratitude for what he did for her that day. She and her husband had just gotten married, and she was able to go on and have three beautiful kids in the ensuing years. All because of what this stranger stopped to do as he himself was running for cover.

It's a powerful reminder of how strangers loved strangers on 9-11 — to the point where lives were saved.

(The documentary is from the National Geographic Channel and can be seen on Hulu: 9-11 Reunion)

C.S. Lewis wrote in his book, *Mere Christianity*, "Don't waste your time bothering whether you feel 'love' for your

neighbor; act as if you did. As soon as we do this, we find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone, you will presently come to love him.”

As Christians, we have but one obligation. The freedom we have been given through our reconciliation in Jesus Christ has eliminated the need for us to follow rules in order to secure our places in the kingdom. But there is one debt we must pay; we owe others our love. Whether it's easy or hard, whether we like somebody or not, whether we know somebody or not, we're on the hook for loving. It is God's ultimate command.