

9-6-2020 SERMON CCI Romans 13: 8-14 Our One Outstanding Debt

It's that time of month for paying our bills. Whether we pay our bills by paper checks, or we pay our bills with online bill payment, it's the time each month when we are most aware of how much we owe. This is our water bill that tells me how much we owe for watering our yard these past beautiful warm days. Yikes! Some of us also have mortgage or rent, a car payment, some have student loans, other utilities, and more. Bills can lead to real stress when we owe more than we can pay. During this pandemic, millions of unemployed people and retirees face this debt-reality time of month with fear and dread.

And into all this debt, Paul writes *"Let no debt remain outstanding."* In other words, "Don't owe anyone anything." Right before this, Paul had written, *"Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed."* None of us lives to ourselves. Things are owed. Christians are to pay our debts, whether they are tangible like bills, or intangible like respect and honor.

But Paul says there is one debt we can never pay off- our responsibility to love each other. When we make our last car payment or our last mortgage payment, we're done and we owe no more. It's a day to celebrate! But when it comes to owing love, we're never done. Paying the debt of love would be a lot easier if we didn't find ourselves around cranky, annoying, frustrating, unreasonable, cantankerous people. And that's on a good day! I won't ask you who you had in mind just now! Have you noticed that some people seem to have the "spiritual gift of irritation?" They know how to get under our skin. And yet, Paul says we still have this debt of love to pay, even to them, we owe the kind of love that sent Jesus from heaven to earth to a cross for us.

How can we ever love that way? Paul begins with the Ten Commandments because all the "Thou Shalt Nots" we memorized as kids ultimately flow from love. If we love our spouse, we won't sleep with other people. If we love someone, we won't kill him- not with a weapon or with our words. We won't lie about them or steal from them. We won't covet their easier life or get angry because we have less than they do. When we look at it this way, the law merely spells out what loving our neighbor looks like in specific situations. Love does no harm to a neighbor. Paul adds the words "and whatever other command there may be," because there are other ways to harm our neighbor than just those listed in the 10 Commandments. Like taking immigrant children away from their parents at the border, not helping those in need, rape, domestic abuse, driving under the influence without caring about the danger to others. And in our day, refusing to wear a face mask and social distance during this pandemic without care for the danger we put others in, and racial prejudice that refuses to see all people created equally in the image of God, and more. Love does none of these things.

We've been given the bottomline guide about how we are to treat one another in new situations. What would love do? What would we want others to do for us if we were in that situation? Do what love would do. But it's not always clear, is it? Look to the stories and parables of Jesus. How did Jesus respond in challenging ethical situations? Follow him. When all else fails, do no harm because love does not harm a neighbor. Which begs the question- who is our neighbor? Jesus addressed that question in his parable of the Good Samaritan. A

Jewish man was walking down to Jericho when he was attacked by robbers, beaten, and left to die. Two religious leaders came along the same road and saw him lying there, walked by and continued on their journey. Then a despised Samaritan came along the road and when he saw the injured man, he stopped and compassionately provided for his care even though, if the roles were reversed, the injured Jewish man never would have done the same for him because Jews and Samaritans had nothing to do with each another. But this Samaritan did what love does- he loved his neighbor as himself. Jesus makes it clear that our neighbors include those with whom we disagree, those who are different from us, and even those who fight against us or persecute us. We love them because God loved us first. Our lifelong response to God's love for us is to faithfully love our neighbors as ourselves. It's the debt that's never paid off.

It's clear that we live in a particularly perilous time, a dangerous time, we all feel it. It's a time that encourages us to divide into our separate camps, us against them, to narrow who is our neighbor to our own, and not love those in other camps. To even denigrate and despise those in other camps- like the Jews and Samaritans treated one another. Republicans vs Democrats, right vs left, rich vs poor, citizen vs immigrant, educated vs uneducated, mask wearers vs non-mask wearers. Paul's call to "Wake up" speaks a message in our day. Wake up! Don't get sucked in to the ways of the world around us. Wake up! Clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ and respond with the thoughts and ways of Christ instead. The One who taught us to be neighbor to **all** people, not just those like us and with whom we agree. Talk and act as one who loves our neighbor as ourselves. Even on social media. In 2 months we will vote. What does voting as one who loves our neighbor as ourselves look like? Paul doesn't tell us what to vote but he does guide us about how to vote. At a minimum, voting as someone who loves our neighbor means voting with our neighbors in mind. Voting with those Jesus called "the least of these" in mind. Voting to provide our neighbors with the same things we want for ourselves. Asking is anyone left out or harmed by this measure? Because voting as one who loves our neighbor seeks to do no harm to our neighbor. Or in this day of difficult decisions, voting for measures that do no more harm to others than they do to me. "Wake up!" Paul says. Love your neighbor as yourself.