

September 7 – The Debt of Love

Romans 13:8-14

In verse 8 Paul says, ‘Don’t be in debt to anyone, except for the obligation to love each other.’ Usually, when we think about debts we think about how much we owe to the bank for our house or our car; or, how big the balance is on our credit card. We sometimes think a little more expansively about how we need to repay someone for their kindness in they had us over for dinner now it is our turn. Though Paul doesn’t say it specifically, he realizes that most of us also hold negative debts towards people. We say, “I will never forgive that person for....” We all have known people who have carried around grudges for years. There are common folklore statements in this same vein: “Don’t get mad, get even. Fool me once shame on you, fool me twice, shame on me.” Unfortunately we tend to hold tightly debts towards persons that are negative. We may forget a kindness done but we can readily remember a slight. Paul says some pretty striking things about our hanging on to these kinds of debts and how they harm us spiritually.

When we hold a debt other than the debt to love another Paul says that this is to hold on to actions that belong to the darkness. We don’t like to hear that, do we? We know we are to walk in the light so being told this is choosing to walk in darkness is unsettling. But, in hearing this we think we are justified in our feelings for after all we have been hurt. We want to get a pass on this situation and this individual because...

Paul says even more. To hold on to these types of debts is doing harm to our neighbor. Ouch, that really hurts. We never want to place our actions into the realm of doing harm but we understand, at least on a philosophical level, that holding grudges and ill will towards another does damage. It damages our relationship with them; it often poisons our relationships with others as well, for if our friend is also the friend of that other person can we really trust our friend? And sometimes it causes us to turn our backs on this person in their time of need.

Finally, and here for me is the hardest one to deal with. When we hold a debt towards another, other than the debt to love, it is to indulge in selfish desires. My

holding on to anger, refusing to forgive and forget, and all the rest, no matter what justification we might give for holding those feelings is, according to Paul, to indulge in selfish desires. Do we believe it? Where does self-protection end and selfishness begin? That question is an important one. After all, no one expects us to continually be taken advantage of in the name of Christian charity. We know that there is a difference between helping and enabling destructive behaviors. When do we say no for the right reasons and when it is selfishness? There are no good answers to those questions, and they are answered differently for each individual. But questions of boundaries and integrity are not really what I think Paul was addressing.

He was talking about the really negative feelings where we hold a grudge forever against a person, where we wish them ill for what they have done to us or a loved one, when we feel we will never forgive them and we reject all overtures of reconciliation. Paul says this is indulging our selfish desires. Because we think our hurt feelings are more important than Jesus commands to love and forgive. Our wounds are somehow deeper than Jesus' wounds on the cross who forgave those who crucified him.

We get the big picture and perhaps are squirming just a little in our seats as we run a mental checklist of our feelings and actions towards some other people. So let us turn to the positive for the remainder of our time together. Let us see what it means to hold a debt of love and I will give you some practical ways to make that type of action a part of our life.

What happens when we hold just one debt towards others, the debt to love? First of all this is part of what it means for us to put on the weapons of light. Now that is a much more encouraging image than the thought that we choose the darkness, isn't it? So think about it? Every time we are presented with a choice of how we are to relate to another we are choosing between light and darkness, between loving and resenting. When we put it into that type of context the choice is much clearer, isn't it?

Paul goes on to say it is how we fulfill the laws of God. The Jews of Paul's day were all about trying to follow the laws as laid down in the Torah, the first five books of the law plus the Mishnah, the traditions of the Rabbi's that expanded on those laws.

There were literally thousands of laws that a person was to follow if they were faithful. The Pharisees spent most of their waking hours trying to do just that. It was overwhelming. Paul, following Jesus' teaching, says they are all summed up in the one idea of loving your neighbor as yourself. To act lovingly instead of holding onto resentment is walking in the light and fulfilling the law of the prophets and the teaching of Jesus and don't we want to be law abiding citizens?

Finally, Paul says it is putting on Christ instead of our selfish desires. It answers the question, "What would Jesus do?" There was a book that asked that question and for a while you could buy jewelry of all types with the initials "WWJD." Paul says it is easy to know what Jesus would do. Jesus would love and not hold grudges.

So, what must we do? First we must set aside our feelings and hurts and only ask the question "how can I be loving to that person?" And I would remind us again that the loving thing to do sometimes is to not help, to not give them anything, because that would be enabling bad behavior. So, we have to always see a huge caution flag waving when we dwell on our feelings and this causes us to react negatively towards another. Whenever there has been a disagreement someone has to make the first step towards reconciliation and if we hold the debt to love you know that's what we are required to do.

Secondly, we are called upon to forgive and forget. A scientist one day asked a group of randomly gathered people this question. Can you list 5 really negative things that happened to you over one year ago but not more than five years ago? Most were able to give a list in less than a minute. When asked about five really joyful moments it took the listeners over two minutes on average and some could not come up with five. It goes to show that our tendency is to hang on to the negative while forgetting the positive and Jesus asks us to flip that. It can be done but we have to work at it.

Finally, this is a call to love unconditionally. Whenever we put conditions on our love we are failing. A reminder, love is different than help. We might have to limit help but we never have to limit our love, our care, our attention.

I recall a story a woman shared. Her grandson had made a lot of poor choices. He kept turning to grandma for a handout. She finally realized that this was not

ultimately helping him. The next time he asked and she said no he flung in her face, "You don't love me!" It was all she could do to smile and say how much she loved him but wouldn't give him more money. He stormed out of her house vowing to never talk to her again. That afternoon she sent him a card reminding him of her love. She sent him notes for weeks and months with no response. She sent him a birthday present but heard no thank you. It was tough but she vowed to not dwell on her pain but remember that she was doing the most loving thing for her grandson even if he didn't appreciate it. Finally, after several years he began to respond to her notes and to her presents. He finally came to visit and let her know how much it meant to him that she loved him even when he wasn't acting very nice. She continues to pray for him and hopes he will make better choices.

So love, forgive, walk in the light. It is what Christ did and what we are asked to do as well.