

# Love For One Another: The True Debt Crisis

Romans 13:7-14  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Last Sunday, I preached a sermon based on the second half of Romans 12, the Apostle Paul's "To Do" list of how to live together in true community. I stated, "In actuality, what it provides is a window on what life in Christ looks like in community, and therefore can be used as a kind of measuring stick to see how well we are doing." The list includes such things as:

- Let love be genuine;
- Love one another with mutual affection;
- Outdo one another in showing honor.
- Extend hospitality to strangers.
- Live in harmony with one another;
- Do not claim to be wiser than you are.
- Do not repay anyone evil for evil,
- Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

In the second half of chapter 13, the passage I read just a moment ago, Paul continues with his instruction of how the Christian community, with God's help, can live together in community. He does this by returning to perhaps his favorite subject: love. In verse 8 Paul tells us, "**Owe no one anything, except to love one another.**" Or to paraphrase: If there is anything that followers of Jesus owe to any person, it must be nothing other than love.

**Our love for one another is the definitive identity marker of our Christian community.** So crucial is this gift of love that Paul goes on to state, "for one who loves another has fulfilled the law... Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law."

Perhaps you've never noticed this particular description of what it means to love another. Love, in the Greek *agape*, does no wrong to a neighbor. To put it positively, love does what is good to a neighbor. Love, therefore, seeks out the well-being of another. Love is living in a right relation with others, marked by justice and egalitarian practices. Love subverts jealousy, envy, covetousness, and greed. **Love builds community.** As a faith community, then, we are to be characterized by our practices of radical love and generous hospitality. This is why Paul can emphatically state that love of God and love of neighbor as oneself (which for Paul are inseparable) fulfills the entire law of God.

Notice that Paul's understanding of love has very little to do with emotion and feelings toward another. Rather, the love to which he refers has to do with our attitudes and behaviors directed towards others – our **ethics put into action. Our neighbor will know that we love them by how we treat them.** Or as the old hymn states, "And they'll know we are Christians by our love."

Just in case we need reminding, Jesus has already nicely defined "neighbor" to include any human being with whom we interact. A neighbor, in the biblical sense, is not

someone whom we pick and choose. We fulfill the law, therefore, by acting in a loving way toward our families, our friends, our enemies, our boss or co-workers or fellow students, and the clerk at the grocery or convenience store. It also includes, of course, how we act in a loving way toward each other right here in this congregation. **That is the debt that we “owe” to each other – the debt of love.**

If there is indeed a crisis in Christianity today, I would say it's because we have forgotten that we have a debt that is owed to everyone we encounter, and that debt is to love them – not in a touchy-feely sort of way, but in a way that truly seeks their well-being. From Paul's perspective, it's also important to note that **none of this is possible without being transformed by first recognizing that God loves us – and that there is nothing we can do to earn that love.** We just are.

I like the second part of today's reading in that Paul puts before us a sense of urgency in our mission as Christians to love others. Paul tells the Christians in Rome, “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; the night is far gone, the day is near.”

Paul's urgent warnings fall into the literary category of what theologians call apocalyptic eschatology. That's a fancy term for the “end times” or the “last days” or the “Second Coming.” Yes it is true, most biblical scholars believe that Paul assumed that Jesus would return within his lifetime. Almost 2000 years later, we may have a different perspective on the question of timing. But the ethical implications remain the same. For instance, while I personally don't believe that Jesus is coming again on the clouds tomorrow, perhaps if I thought he was coming tomorrow I might live my life in a more loving way today.

So in his typical fashion, Paul warns his readers to “lay aside the works of darkness.” He then presents a list that includes not participating in wild drunken parties, or engaging in promiscuous gratifications of sexual desires. He even warns about avoiding internal conflicts that lead to quarreling and jealousy. This is not an exhaustive list of all vices by any means. Rather, they are among those things that can be destructive in our lives or in the lives of others.

Paul goes on to remind us of a great theme of the Christian tradition: **the day of Christ – the kingdom of God – has begun.** The light is dawning. A new day is at hand and lies open before us. These poetic words present to us a metaphorical “wake up call.” We are told to get up and get dressed. Paul expressively tells us to “**put on the armor of light.**” While that militaristic language, armor, is bothersome to many of us, it nonetheless reminds us that **instead of fighting each other, we need to unite against a common enemy. That enemy can indeed be described as “darkness” – and can be found in such things as injustice, violence, ignorance, intolerance, exploitation, addictions, thirst for revenge, prejudice and fear, greed, and so forth.**

Paul calls us to fight against these destructive powers that enslave and divide people, and bring harm to ourselves. The question becomes: How can you and I work toward that goal as a congregation, and as individuals in our daily lives? **If we as Presbyterians throughout this country, for example, could engage in the battle against such destructive and divisive powers, instead of battling ourselves, we might find that we can work for the unity of the church.**

**For as neighbors we do owe each other something, and that is the debt of love – our true debt crisis.**

Amen.

Resources:  
Feasting on the Word - Commentary