
INDEBTED

ROMANS 13:8-14

A SERMON PREACHED IN DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL
ON SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 6, 2020,
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We have so much debt. I'm not talking about our national debt which is in the trillions. Nor am I speaking about credit card debt due to high spending and high interest rates that you just can't seem to pay it off. Nor am I speaking of college loans for which you still have ten more years to go until they're paid off. I'm talking about another kind of debt that we owe. We have so much debt to pay.

I can hear the bold voices declaring in the silos of selfishness, "I don't owe anyone anything!" But you do. We do as human beings. It just hasn't taken root in our hearts as of yet. We are indebted. We may act as if we owe nothing. We may act as if we own everything. Some act as if they are god, god of country, god of institutions, god of the law, god of human life so they feel free enough to take a human life without a thought. This is the "land of the free"? Think again. We are enslaved by inhumanity. It's become more like the home of the cowardly because it takes more strength and restraint and courage not to do violence than to do it.

The violence we've seen on the streets in Portland, Oregon, and Kenosha, Wisconsin, is vicious opposition to the love of God. And brothers and sisters, that is our only debt. "Owe no one anything, except to love one another." We owe each other love. Not erotic love (*eros*) or friendship love (*philia*) but God's love (*agape*), unconditional, unmerited, and to some, rationally incomprehensible love. We are indebted to each other and shooting at people, killing people, hurling physical objects like glass bottles or cans at people, driving cars through crowds over people, are a revelation that we think we are owners, not owers. Peaceful protests are one thing but violence against fellow human beings is proof of the moral spiritual hole in the heart of humanity. The problem is that we think we own one another when we actually owe each other. And before we get too uppity as Christians and point fingers at 'those people,' we, Christians, can be just as violent, abhorrent, ungodly like anyone else. Historically, much violence has been done in the name of Christ.

We have so much debt to pay. We owe each other so much love. "Love, a word that comes and goes but few people really know what it means to really love somebody" (Kirk Franklin). Love is our only debt to each other and it fulfills the law. The law of love fulfills all law.

"The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet"; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself." The law of love rules in the kingdom of God. You can have all of the 'thou shall nots' you want framed and posted on a wall in a prominent place in your home or in the court house entrance, but if you don't have love, we're just making noise like clanging cymbals, like ding dongs. Do you hear the clanging, dinging, ringing? They seem to be so loud these days.

All the 'nots.' Not adultery. Not murder. Not stealing. Not coveting. Not you. Not your race. Not your gender. Not your sexuality. Not your political affiliation. Not your America. Not your church. All the 'nots' are clanging so loud to drown out the love of God. And it is the one thing we owe each other—love. So often we define ourselves or our commitments *via negativa*, by a negative way, by what we are against. We are not for adultery or not for murder or not for stealing or coveting. But that doesn't tell anyone anything about what you are for.

Rather, here in Romans, the apostle Paul shows us what and who we should be for. He presents love *via positiva*, in a positive way. Love one another. Love your neighbor as yourself. Love is for the other. It isn't defined according to what it is against or with a 'not.' It is presented by what it is for and it is for you, me, all of humanity. Love one another. It's our only debt. What are you for? Who are you for? Love calls us to be for each other, not against each other, including our enemies, and this is taught in a historical context of great tension in Rome between

Jews and Christians. “Owe no one anything, except to love one another.” You may disagree on politics or sports or how to handle the coronavirus outbreak. But love one another. Because, God is love.

Remember, earlier in Romans 12, Paul tells them, “Beloved, never avenge yourselves...” Taking vengeance into your own hands will not only put you in deeper debt, but it will show that you’ve become the very thing you hate—the angry shooter, the belligerent driver, the spewing-hate-out-of-the-mouth talker. What are you for? Who are you for?

I hope you’re for love and for other human beings. What I love about love is that it is a noun, *agape*, but it is also a verb. All the don’ts of the law are fulfilled with one do—love. “Love does no wrong to a neighbor.” Love does. It not only is; it does. Love is active, more than a word or saying, “I love you.” It is action. It is ethics. It’s not an idea only to discuss, but something to embody, to live, to enact in community. “Do not repay evil for evil but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.”

Love is the more excellent way. The noble path. Love, in so many ways, is counter action to violence, yet it takes the risk to receive violence on itself.

In July, a 23 year old Duke Divinity student was outside of his Durham home, helping a neighbor who had locked his keys in his car. Helping this neighbor with a small act of kindness, a gesture of love. As he was helping him, there was a drive-by shooting and he was shot in the abdomen. This student has had multiple surgeries, but was released from the hospital in August and is now recovering, slowly but surely. Some might say that he was in the wrong place at the wrong time but showing love to a neighbor is never wrong. “Love does no wrong to a neighbor” even in the face of violence.

And in the summer of 2015, some congregation members at the Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston, SC, held a Bible study at the church and welcomed a stranger into their midst to study the Bible with them. This stranger ended up becoming an enemy as he shot those attending the Bible study, killing nine of them. Love extends hospitality to strangers even if that stranger seeks your demise.

Love helps. Love welcomes. Love risks potential violence and even death because that is the logic of love. Does the love you give cost you anything? If not, it might not be the love of Christ.

I say this because the logic of the love of God is the cross. God’s love epitomized in Christ on the cross is self-giving love. It is self-dispossession for the other. It is action. In the words of Jesus himself, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” Christ lays down that we might eventually rise with him. But it costs him something. It costs him his life. He didn’t owe us anything but he still loved us unto death. “He paid a debt he did not owe. I owe a debt I could not pay.”

So when Paul says to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ,” it’s similar to hearing in Ephesians, “put on the whole armor of God.” Put on Christ. Clothe yourself in Christ. Dress in him. Be covered in him because there is no other way to pay the debt we owe to each other. There is no other way to gain the power to love. We can only love God’s way when we put on Christ all over our life, from the top of our head to the soles of our feet. And when we are covered with Jesus Christ, we live his life of love, even if it nails us to a cross for our neighbor, even if it gets us shot as we love.

Putting on Christ should change your comportment and character. To use the language of Paul, there should be a transformation. You may not help someone get their keys out of a car or welcome someone to Bible study, but you will show love in other big and small ways.

An eight-year-old boy had a younger sister who was dying of leukemia, and he was told that without a blood transfusion she would die. His parents explained to him that his blood was probably compatible with hers and, if so, he would be the blood donor. They asked him if they could test his blood. He said sure. So they did and it was a

good match. Then they asked if he would donate to his sister a pint of his blood, that it could be her only chance of living. He said he would have to think about it overnight. The next day he went to his parents and said he was willing to donate the blood. So they took him to the hospital where he was placed on a gurney beside his six-year-old sister. Both of them were hooked up to IV's. A nurse withdrew a pint of blood from the boy, which was then transferred to the girl's IV. The boy lay on his gurney in silence while the blood dripped into his sister, until the doctor came over to see how he was doing. Then the boy opened his eyes and asked, "How soon until I start to die?" (Anne Lamott)

This is the logic of love. Love calls us to come and die. Love is a self-giving verb and it does no wrong to a neighbor because it is the debt we owe to one another. "Owe no one anything, except to love one another." We owe each other but do not own one another. "Now is the moment to wake from sleep." Now is the moment to be woke to the love of God, even if it kills you.