

# Love For One Another: The True Debt Crisis

Romans 13:8-14  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd Freeman  
September 7, 2014

Today is the third Sunday in a series of sermons dealing with **creating and living into genuine and authentic community**. Undergirding any number of reasons of why we exist as a congregation lies a **deep desire and a diligent striving to develop the kind of relationships between ourselves that are life-giving, encouraging, supportive, honest, and even challenging**. We grow into these kinds of relationships by:

- being true to whom we are as individuals,
- risking the sharing of ourselves by trusting each other enough to be vulnerable,
- realizing that as a community we are responsible and accountable to one another.

That takes a lot of effort, and that takes a lot of commitment. We learn a great deal about all this from the letter that the apostle Paul sent to the Christians in Rome. From the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of Romans (which we looked at the past two Sundays), we learn that all this begins by not being conformed to this world's values, but rather, by **being transformed by the renewing of our minds so that we are aligned with God's values**.

This is expanded by what I call Paul's "To Do" list of how to live together in true community. This list can actually 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** – as in sincere, honest, without pretense, play-acting, ulterior motives, or hypocrisy.

This genuine love is lived out in the following ways:

- Love one another with mutual affection – which means truly caring for the well-being of each other.
- Outdo one another in showing honor.
- Extend hospitality to strangers – by making room for them in our hearts and lives.
- Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep – in other words, have true empathy for others
- Live in harmony with one another.
- Be humble and associate with the lowly.
- 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 we followers of Jesus owe to any person, it must be **the debt of 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.** In other words, **love builds community.**

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 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, like a friend. 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, marked by respect and dignity.

From Paul's perspective, it's also important to note that none of this is possible without being transformed ourselves by **first recognizing that God already loves us, and that there is nothing we can do to earn that love.** We just are. And 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.

In his typical fashion, Paul makes an urgent appeal that we **“lay aside the works of darkness.”** The list he provides basically refers to those things that are destructive to ourselves and others. Paul continues his rich metaphorical imagery of the movement from darkness to light by saying we need 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, metaphorically, as “darkness” – and can be found in such things as **the darkness of injustice, violence, ignorance, intolerance, exploitation, addictions, thirst for revenge, prejudice and fear, greed, and so forth.** Our calling, as Christians, is to fight against these destructive powers that enslave and divide people, and bring harm to ourselves and others. So the guiding question ever before us 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 *these* destructive and divisive powers, instead of battling ourselves, we might find that we can work for the peace, unity and purity of the church.

But remember, first and foremost, that 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*