

# Loving One Another is the Debt We Owe

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

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~~During a good portion of this~~ latter summer, we've been exploring **what it means to live together in unity** as a compassionate, forgiving, hospitable, and loving community of faith. Just last Sunday, we looked at the **first half of Romans 12**, including the apostle Paul's declaration, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect." (v.2). We discussed how the process of renewing our minds helped lead many of us to a transformation, a metamorphosis of sorts, from traditional to progressive Christianity, and with all that implies.

Several Sundays earlier, we looked at the **second half of Romans 12** with Paul's "To Do" list of how to live together as a genuine community of faith. The list, which was used as a bulletin insert, includes such things as:

- Let love be genuine;
- Love one another with mutual affection;
- Outdo one another in showing honor;
- Rejoice in hope;
- Be patient in suffering;
- Persevere in prayer;
- 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.

Today, in the **13<sup>th</sup> chapter of Romans**, Paul continues his instructions of how the Christian community, with God's help, can live together in unity and faithful obedience as we seek to follow the ways and teachings of Jesus. 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 our love. **Our love for one another is the definitive identity marker of our Christian community.** This is love without any pretense, hypocrisy, or ulterior motives, which, of course, isn't really love at all.

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...**" Perhaps you've never noticed that description of what it means to love one another – to do no wrong. **Love, in the Greek *agape*, seeks out the well-being of and right relationship with each other.**

Love subverts jealousy, envy, covetousness, and greed. Love requires vulnerability, an open heart and mind, forgiveness, risk, and trust. 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 and morality put into action.** As a faith community, then, we are to be characterized, even recognized, by our practices of love, which involves generous hospitality and inclusion. **Our neighbor will know that we love them by how we treat them. Or as the old hymn states, which we will sing in a moment, “And they’ll know we are Christians by our love.”**

Just in case we need reminding, Jesus has already nicely defined “neighbor” to include every human being with whom we interact. A neighbor, in the biblical sense, is not someone whom we pick and choose. We simply are each other's neighbor. We fulfill the law, therefore, by acting in a loving way toward our families, our friends, those with whom we differ and disagree, our boss or co-workers or fellow students, the clerk at the grocery store, the one who serves our table in a restaurant, the strangers we meet in everyday life. It also includes, of course, how we act in loving ways toward each other right here in this community of faith. **That is the debt that we “owe” to each other – the debt of love.**

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, all people, unconditionally – and that there is nothing we can do to earn that love. We just are. That is the very definition of grace.

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. Perhaps if people thought Jesus was coming tomorrow they might live their life in a more loving way today. That was Paul's point. Many of us, however, believe the Sacred Presence of Christ has already come and is always with us.

Given Paul's understanding, he warns his readers to **“lay aside the works of darkness.”** With that mindset, Paul presents a list that includes refraining from participating in activities such as 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. Paul has several other lists. Rather, they are among those things that can be detrimental, even destructive, in our lives or in the lives of others, and certainly to life together in community.

Paul goes on to remind us of a great theme of the Christian tradition: the day of Christ – the kin-dom of God – has already 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 adversary. **That adversary, biblically described as “darkness”, can be found in such things as injustice, violence, ignorance, intolerance, exploitation, addictions, thirst for revenge, prejudice, fear, greed, and so forth.** Paul calls us to fight against these destructive powers that enslave and divide people, and bring harm to ourselves and others. As an increasingly common aside, **our current political system has certainly become “dark”, for it is adversarial, divisive, and often harmful. How does the armor of light help us when facing this darkness?** As the South African freedom song puts it, **“We are marching in the light of God,” and how we march makes all the difference in fulfilling the command to love one another – all others.**

In a broader sense, how can you and I work toward those goals as a loving community of faith, and as individuals in our daily lives? For as neighbors we do owe each other something, and that is the debt of love – a true debt crisis in our day and age.

Amen.

Resources:

Feasting on the Word - Commentary