

SERMON – Pay the Debt of Love: Romans 13: 8-10

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Charley Mackasy is a Christian illustrator and author who last year published and released a simple book. By December 2019 it had sold 51,610. It is quite simply a book of illustrations and snippets of conversations between a boy, a mole, a Fox and a horse but it communicates deep truths about relationships and struggles and hopes and fears. Something about it struck a chord with many people and one of its dominant themes is love – what it means to love others, what friendship looks like, and what it means to encourage, support and care for each other day by day through thick and thin, through storm and calm, through times of disaster and times of peace. With the escalation of the corona virus I am sure this book will continue to sell, and Instagram followers will continue to increase.

God's love for us is the greatest theme in Scripture – From beginning to end He demonstrates his love, his Grace and his mercy to mankind, fulfilled finally through the death of his son in our place, to bring us life and forgiveness. "We love because he first loved us," So, as we face uncertain times and begin to do church very differently for the next few weeks/months, lets pray that God would reveal more of his love for us, and equip us as a church family to love others with a love that comes from him.

Our key verse today is this. “Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellow-man has fulfilled the law.”

I’m a stickler for paying off debt...for keeping on top of the bank account, keeping in the red and managing our money so that debt doesn’t take hold. And there is something incredibly freeing about knowing a debt is paid, and the credit card is clear and there is one less thing to worry about! Paul tells us it is right to pay what we owe, seek to be debt free and honour those in authority. But he also says the only debt that will never be paid off, and should never be paid off is the debt of love! We can never say ‘I have done all the loving I need to do’.

Our love for one another, will never run out. In fact in every circumstance we need to ask ourselves...what is the most loving thing I can do in this situation? – so poignant at a time when many are so fearful, or a self-isolated and alone. What is the most loving thing I can do during this Coronavirus pandemic? Or on a more cheery, and simpler note...what is the most loving thing I can do today, on mother’s day when for some it is a difficult day or sad, or lonely or just impossible to be with family?

We are called to continually love others, and Paul gives us some clear answers to some simple questions in this passage that help us to understand what that love looks like on a day by day basis?

1. Firstly, **WHO** ARE WE TO LOVE?

Our call is to love beyond ourselves, beyond the church family and out into the community and world outside. The old NIV says we are called to love our fellow-man – no, not man as in just the men but mankind...people....all people everywhere. These are our NEIGHBOURS. The translation of ‘neighbour’ really means anyone in need, or any other person. Basically, what is being said is that we are to love everyone, beyond our church walls and community and that in doing so we are fulfilling God’s law.

Think of the story of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10 –The Samaritan gives his time, and money to ensure a man he doesn’t know, gets all the care he needs. He goes out of his way, he sacrifices what he has for the sake of someone he doesn’t know...and Jesus’ challenge to the teacher of the law who are listening is this, Go and do likewise! It’s the same challenge for us.

Sometimes we can be very good as churches in caring for our own, but this challenge calls us to love our literal neighbours, those who live far and near – those that suffer, those that are lonely, those that are not like us, those that are perhaps self-isolated this week or in the weeks to come; What is the most loving

thing to do for those people particularly when we can't gather and actually be with them?

Our second question – **WHY DO WE NEED TO LOVE LIKE THIS?** Look at verse 8 - **BECAUSE LOVING OTHERS FULFILS THE LAW.**

Jesus takes the Old Testament very seriously. It is God's Word and he doesn't ignore **what's gone before, but takes what's gone before and goes even**

further. Take for example Matthew 5 21 "you heard that it was said to people long ago, "do not murder" – but Jesus says....not only is murder a commandment to be obeyed, but even anger too is to be taken seriously and will be the subject of judgement. Anger harms another, as murder harms another. For the follower of Christ, there is a call to godly living that goes beyond what has been without dismissing it. A call to loving others that is radical and sacrificial. Murder is wrong, but so too is the murderous thought, the hateful gossip, the retaliation and revenge we looked at last week.

Jesus summarises God's commandments in Matthew 22 - "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind and Love you neighbour as yourself." He says, all the Law and the prophets hang on these two commandments. It's like all the commands of God fit under this broad umbrella – Love God and love others...Simple!

So loving our neighbour fulfils the law because it is a love that goes beyond all that has gone before and it is rooted in the greatest love of all - Christ's sacrificial and unconditional love for all humanity.

And so to our 3rd question...**HOW DO WE LOVE LIKE THIS?** How is it even possible to begin to love others in this radical way, taking seriously God's commandments and yet loving even beyond them? The answer I think comes earlier in Romans – Chapter 5 vs 5. **BECAUSE LOVE HAS BEEN POURED INTO OUR HEARTS BY THE HOLY SPIRIT.** It is the Spirit that enables us to love others, to bring no harm to our neighbours and to love beyond what we can imagine we can do. God himself has poured his love into the hearts of the believer that we might pour it out to others....

We need to let God's spirit rule in our lives, and flow out to others around us. It's not that we will know how to love others by trusting our feelings – that's a terrifying thought because our feelings are so unreliable and self-centred, often leading us to pleasing ourselves rather than God or others. And it's not that we know how to love others by just making a practical plan because we ought to and because we think God will be pleased with us if we serve others. That's not loving with God's love either.

Radical Christ-like love means refraining from adultery but it also means be careful what we watch, be careful how we look at another person, not letting

lust creep in making us devalue another of God's children and treating them as anything less than precious. Radical love means treating all people with respect in terms of what they have – so not stealing or coveting or selfishly putting all our efforts and money into having stuff or getting stuff! One commentator writes “We cannot let the world shape our definition of love. We must instead let God's word in the scriptures define what is truly loving.”

Radical love doesn't obey God because you have to. The Pharisees were great at that! They created laws to keep the laws, and had hundreds written down in the Mishnah so that they could seek to be without fault. But where was their heart for their neighbour, for those that were different from them, for those on the margins of the community?

Paul writes that real faith or indeed love isn't as the Jews believed, about keeping food laws, or being circumcised as an outward sign of belonging to God, but instead it is about trusting Christ, living for Him, recognising that he is love himself, and in doing so reaching out with his love to others. It is possible to give to the poor but without love; it is possible to pray without love; it is possible to gather in your own homes and listen to an online talk without love and it is possible to serve others without love – 1 Cor 13 “If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.”

It is God's love poured into our hearts by his spirit that enables us to pick up the phone in the weeks to come and listen, pray and encourage one another; to be patient with our difficult neighbour who is fearful of catching corona; to be generous with our money and provide food for the homeless. It is His love that enables us to forgive one another when the close proximity of self-isolation becomes a pressure point and His love that means we find ways in the coming weeks to build relationships with our neighbours, seeing them as a loved children of God just as we are.

Most of all, it is love that fills our hearts that inspires us to share Jesus with others – that is the sign of truly loving our neighbour – not keeping the best news in the world to ourselves but passing it on, sharing it, let others discover for themselves what it means to be truly loved and in turn, to love others.

CONCLUSION

IT seems very timely to be looking at a passage today that calls us to love.

Perhaps in the weeks to come whenever we think of someone we ought to say to ourselves, "I need to show him or her the love of Christ. I have a great and wonderful debt to pay." We owe them... wherever we go (even if it's limited), whoever we meet, we owe love – this is our debt! Our only debt.

And we owe them today...because as Paul writes as he ends this chapter the opportunity for loving others is now in this present time until Christ returns...it's

an opportunity we don't want to miss and it's an opportunity at a time of world crisis whereas things are shutting down I believe Gods light will shine by his spirit, through the lives of his people and we can reach out with His love and see lives transformed. So let's love one another as He has loved us.