

An Ongoing Obligation
Romans 13:8-10
#64 in a Series on Paul's Letter to the Romans
Faith Community Church – April 22, 2007

Introduction

Another tax season has come and gone. I wonder how many of you waited to file until the last minute?

It is a process that no one likes, and there is always that moment of truth when you look in to the tax tables and see if you are going to be receiving or if you are going to be giving. At times I have had fleeting thoughts about the legitimacy of claiming our dog as a family member, but in the end on those years in which I owe, I pay. And we should. That is what the Bible tells us in Romans 13:1-7. We have obligations as citizens – including payment of taxes – that we are expected to fulfill.

In the passage that we will look at today, however, Paul is going to talk about another kind of obligation that we have, and it is one that, despite the payments we make, is never going to be paid in full. Our first thought might be, “Who wants that kind of obligation?” But this is a debt that is worth having, and one from which much good can come.

Re-establishing Contact with the Message of Romans

Before we look at this passage, I want to take just a few minutes and put what we will read into its setting. Romans is divided into two major sections. Chapters 1-11 explain the major truths of the Christian faith. In them Paul talks about being lost, about being justified, about being sanctified, and addresses the relationship between the Church and the promises made to Israel.

Chapters 12-16 explain how the truth of what God has done for us impacts the way we think and live. 12:1-2 sets out a broad statement of purpose for us. From 12:3 to the end of the chapter, Paul talks about relationships – primarily relationships within the Church, but also relationships with those who are outside, including those who mistreat us, and those who have authority over us.

An Ongoing Obligation

1. We have an ongoing obligation to love each other.

Most of us have or have had debt. And this is not a prohibition against having debt. What this passage tells us is that there are no debts that should remain outstanding – we should pay our debts. But we have a special debt that we must always regard as outstanding, and that is the debt to love each other.

Who does Paul mean by “each other?” He also uses the expression, “your neighbor?” In the context of the larger section of Romans, I would say that Paul is thinking primarily of our relationships within the community of believers – the church – by not exclusively. I think that Paul says it well in Galatians 6:10: “So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.

I want to illustrate this in a very practical way. Normally there is a moment in our service where I ask you to stand and greet each other. I’d like you to do that now. I want you to realize that every person that you’ve shaken hands with, said hello to, looked at, made eye-contact with – with each person you have a debt that you owe them. How that debt is paid will vary, but I want you to get a sense of the obligation that we have.

2. When we fulfill this obligation we are fulfilling the intent of God’s Law.

What Paul says here mirrors what Jesus said in the Gospels. Look at Matthew 23:34-40. Let’s look at the Old Testament background for this statement:

- In Exodus 20:1-17 God gives Moses what we call the Ten Commandments.
- In Leviticus 19:1-18 the pattern of behavior toward both God and each other that we find in Exodus is reinforced. But verse 18 bottom-lines this and says to love your neighbor as yourself.
- In Romans 13, then, Paul picks out a few of these commands and makes the point that these laws that regulate the way we treat each other can be summed up in the words of Leviticus 19:18. He argues that love does not wrong to a neighbor, therefore to act in love fulfills the law.

What does it mean to love your neighbor as yourself? Despite what you may read in some of the religious pop-psychology books, this is not an instruction that we need to love ourselves, boost our self-esteem. This command is not about you, it is about how we treat other people. I think one writer has it right when he said, “. . . it is certain that a person will love himself, and it is also certain that he will do so in spite of the fact that the self he loves has many faults. So then, also he should most certainly love his neighbor.”¹

Let me also hasten to add that paying the debt of love is not just a matter of not doing wrong to someone else. Do I show you love just because of what I don’t do to you? Is that the way it works in marriage or in raising your kids? Love is obviously demonstrated by what we do as well as what we don’t do.

We see the balance of positive and negative in a passage such as 1 Corinthians 13:4-7, and in the example of Jesus in Ephesians 5:2. I want to emphasize this because we can’t consider ourselves off the hook just because we can say, “Well, I don’t do that.” There is a positive side of every negative command. (See, time permitting, Leviticus 19:9-10).

¹ William Hendriksen, Romans.

In summary then, fulfilling the interpersonal responsibilities that God gives us is the way to paying the debt of love that we owe each other.

3. This ongoing obligation must challenge the way that we conduct our lives.

Let me suggest three implications of how this passage affects our thinking and behavior:

- First, owing each other love requires us to be attentive to the personal, spiritual, emotional, social and material needs that those around us have and then to consider what part we can play in meeting them.
- Owing each other love requires us to examine our commitment to, and involvement in, our church. Clearly and without question it requires us to be in situations in which we can spend time with other believers and talk with them. (Small groups)
- Owing each other love requires us to examine the way that we spend our time, money and energies because love often requires tangible expression, not just words of encouragement or prayer.

Responding to What God is Saying in This Passage

You'll usually see a heading like the one on your note sheet ("Responding . . .") because I want us to clearly understand that this is not Paul's thinking or my thinking. This is what God says. This is His Word. So how do we respond?

1. Be clear about the fact that loving others – as important as that is – is not what gets us to heaven, earns us forgiveness, or makes us right with God. The ability to love as God wants us to love is an outgrowth of a heart that has been changed and made alive to God through faith in Christ alone. If you want to understand more of what I am talking about, there is a small booklet entitled "The Two Ways" on the ledge in the back of the auditorium.
2. Many of you will remember the fact that our church used to operate an Christian elementary and middle school. In 1996, due to a variety of financial realities, it became necessary to close the school after thirty years of ministry. Despite our efforts to make sure that all of the tuition that was owed to us was paid, there were people who didn't fulfill their obligations. In particular there was one family who had a rather substantial debt that they never paid. On one or two occasions after the school closed, I ran across that family at Genuardis. It was always awkward for them because they knew that they had a debt that they hadn't paid, so it affected the way that they related to me.

This goes along with what one writer says about this passage: "If you have ever had a personal debt . . . you know that the first thing that enters your mind when you see that person is that you 'owe' them. We need to see ourselves as spiritual debtors. When we go to church, town, work, shopping, school – wherever we go, whoever we meet, we owe love."²

² Hughes, R. Kent: Romans

We need, therefore, to open our eyes and remember that we have this debt to pay. Obviously the more we are involved in the lives of a group of people the better opportunity we have to fulfill that debt. But we need to have that attitude. Are you paying your debt?