

The Debt Christians Owe Everyone

Romans 13:8-14

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A farmer is travelling with a fox, a sheep and a small sack of hay. He comes to a river with a small boat in it. The boat can only support the farmer and one other animal/item. If the farmer leaves the fox alone with the sheep, the fox will eat the sheep. And if the farmer leaves the sheep alone with the hay, the sheep will eat the hay.

How can the farmer get all three as well as himself safely across the river?

- The farmer takes the sheep across the river, then returns back.
- The farmer takes the fox across the river.
- The farmer takes the sheep back to the first side of the river.
- The farmer leaves the sheep back on the first side of the river, and takes the hay to the other side.
- The farmer returns to the first side of the river.
- The farmer brings the sheep back to the second side.

There is a small town in central Saskatchewan with exactly two barbershops, one on each side of town. The barbershop on the west side of town is pristine. Its floors are spotless, the windows are always perfectly clear, and the air always smells fresh. The barber has a friendly smile, shined shoes, a well-groomed head of hair, and a fancy shirt. The barbershop on the east side of town is a mess. Its floors and windows are dirty, and the air smells of garbage. The barber always has a grimace on his face. His skin is oily, his hair is short and ragged, and he has food on his clothes all the time.

A man travelling through the town realizes he needs a haircut. Knowing the stories of the two barbers, the man decides to go to the dirty barbershop on the east side of town. Why does he do this?

Because there are only two barbers in the town, the barbers must cut each-other's hair. The barber on the west side of town has a nice haircut, so the east-side barber must be a good barber. On the other hand, the barber on the east side of town has ragged hair, meaning the west-side barber must not be very good. So the man goes to the east-side barber to get a better haircut.

A riddle is a statement or question or phrase having a double or veiled meaning, put forth as a puzzle to be solved. You've just experienced a couple of simple riddles. Riddles can occupy a person's mind for a minute or an hour. Albert

Einstein came up with a riddle that he believed only 2 % of the world's population could solve. But riddles aren't just for games. Riddles appear in life. There are times when the Bible presents some truths that seem like riddles. I think the text we're looking at today contains a couple of them. They are commands that at first glance don't seem to make sense. But upon closer examination, we discover they actually contain keys for living life like God wants us to live.

The riddles go like this.

1- There's a debt you owe that you must always repay but can never pay off.

2- There's a way we must live to prepare for a day but we don't know the date.

Any ideas? See how close you are as we proceed through our time together. We are in Paul's letter to the Romans. Two weeks ago, you travelled through chapter 12:14-21 and pondered how to love those who persecute you or do you wrong.

Last week we learned the command for every Christian to be subject to the authorities or government. We talked about the tension we live with between the authority of God and the authority of government over our lives. We learned that when the government commands us to do something against God's law, we must consciously object. But in other areas, we are called to submit ourselves to the those appointed by God and entrusted by Him with maintaining law and order. He ended this section by talking about paying to the government what we owe – whether it be taxes, revenue, respect or honor. Paul actually uses the same word for owe that Jesus used when he said “render to Caesar what is Caesar.” So he's tying his teaching back to Jesus' words.

Now he proceeds with next part of his letter kind of wrapping up the response to that crucial verse in Romans 12:1 - Therefore, in view of God's mercy, present your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God. This is your spiritual act of worship. So live your life in a sacrificial way before the Lord in response to the immeasurable mercy He has shown you, He forgave you and paid the price for your sin. If you've grown cold or bored with Jesus' sacrifice on your behalf, spend some time in Matthew 26 and 27 to remind yourself of all that Jesus suffered for you. But back to his letter to the Romans, Paul adds a couple more appropriate ways in which we can respond to God's great love for us. In these ways we will find solutions to our little riddles.

Romans 13:8-14 ESV

[8] Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. [9] For 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: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” [10] Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.

[11] Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. [12] The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. [13] Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. [14] But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Paul has just finished writing about the Christian’s response to government. He concluded by saying pay what you owe – taxes, revenue, respect and honor. Now Paul jumps off from the word “Owe” to introduce his next theme. Here’s where we discover the debt we all owe that we must always repay but can never pay off.

Paul writes in verse 8 “Owe no one anything except to love each other.” So here is this debt that we owe everyone. Christians owe everyone love. It is a debt we must constantly pay but can never pay in full because we will always meet people that need our love until the end of our lives. Now just before we explore this love, we need to ask does this verse prohibit owing money? Is it saying we should not buy anything on credit or mortgage? Well there is wisdom in not over extending ourselves. But there are provision sin other places of Scripture for loans. But in taking a loan, the intention is to pay it back. That principle is reaffirmed by Paul here. If you owe something pay it back or work to pay it back. Don’t be in debt to anyone but especially in the area of love.

Now if you’ve been around church or Christianity at all, you know loving others is a huge theme of Jesus’ teaching. When we first hear this, we might quickly dismiss it because we think we know it so well. Doesn’t everyone value “loving one another?” Ya, ya, we know. Let’s move on. But when we contemplate this command a little longer, we discover a depth to it. It does not say love others you want to love. It says love each other – literally “love the other.” Love every person who comes into your life. But we also see that this no mere suggestion. Paul ties it to the commands of God. Do you see that at the end of verse 8 – “For the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.” So by loving others we fulfill God’s law. This debt we owe is not something we pay just to people we like. Nor is this a suggestion from God or an optional activity for spiritual keeners. God commands every Christian to figure out how to love the other in their lives.

But we also have to think about what kind of love are we supposed to offer others? Is it a love that makes other feel warm and fuzzy inside? Is it a love that gives them whatever they want? Is it something that will make them feel good? Well when we look at the love the Bible talks about it, we must take into consideration two people – the person

receiving the love and God. True Biblical Love will honor God. So if we offer a love to someone that in some way violates God's Word or goes against Him, we're not offering Biblical love. We can call it love but it's not the love talked about here.

And this true Biblical love must think of what's best for the other person. It must put their interests above our own. So say we find someone attractive for a season and flirtatiously compliment them. Flirtation is by definition "to play at being in love – but not seriously." If we have no intention of being serious about our love, we're not really offering them love. We're gratifying ourselves at their expense.

I think we need to define the kind of boundaries that govern this love. **Christian love offers every person a love that puts them first and lines up with God's will.** When we offer others this kind of love, we appropriately respond to the mercy God has shown us in our own lives.

But what's all this "love fulfills the law" stuff? Well here's where Paul picks up on Jesus' teaching again. Someone asked Jesus the question. Which is the greatest commandment? Jesus answered – "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength. And the second is like it – Love your neighbor as yourself. All the law and the prophets hang on these two commandments." So if you want to simplify Christianity down to its most basic level

Love God and Love others by putting their interests first and in a way that honors God.

That's what the second half of the Ten Commandments talk about. Though Christians are no longer under the law of Moses, we are under the law of Christ which actually fulfills the commandments to a deeper level. So this love does not commit adultery. It cannot claim that "I committed adultery because I'm in love with this other person." For adultery is not in the best interest of the other person or your spouse or children or their spouse or their children. This love does not murder – that is not in the best interest of the other person according to God. It does not steal from another person. It does not covet what another person has. It has the courage to look honestly at the other person and seek what is best for them in accord with God's will. Such love is a debt we owe to others because of the tremendous gift of love and mercy we have received from God. Each of these commands pushes against any desire we might have to love ourselves or others in an unhealthy way.

Paul sums up this section on our obligation to love with the high standard of verse 10. “Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law”. So if we do wrong to someone else, it shows a flaw in our love for them. But aiming to do no wrong to our neighbor indicates a desire to love them.

Now this does not mean we let others take advantage of us or blindly do whatever they want to keep them happy. No. We can show love to someone by calling them to account for acting in some way that displeases the Lord. But we owe everyone love. If we think about this, we realize loving one another is a familiar command but a formidable journey. Love requires incredible sacrifice. I was thinking about the sacrifices of love some of you are making right now. Families are walking with a family member through a time of great health need. Parents sacrifice their own sleep to stay up with their sick kids. Parents work long and hard to provide for their families. Adults sacrifice time and energy caring for elderly parents. Friends spend time they could be doing something else visiting a shut in or less mobile person. All such acts of love are fulfilling God’s law. They are an appropriate response to God’s mercy shown to us.

There’s a debt you and I owe that we must always repay but can never be pay off. The debt is loving others. We must always pay this debt but we will never pay it off in our lifetime because we’ll always be meeting people in need of love.

But there’s another riddle that needs solving today. **2. There’s a way we must live to prepare for a day but we don’t know the date. (Romans 13:11-14)** Paul will call his readers to live a very different lifestyle than what’s common. But first he gives them reasons why they must live like this. The reason has something to do with time.

So verse 11 – Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake up from sleep. Now think about waking and sleeping in the ancient world. The only artificial lighting they had was lamps or torches. People didn’t stay up late working on their computers or phoning their friends. Their society was governed by the light of the sun. So everyone got up at dawn. There was no sleeping in. Only slackards would stay in bed after the first glow of daylight. Early rising was especially necessary in the Middle East because of the heat in midday. So you needed to get the bulk of your work done in the morning before the scorching sun shut down most activity. So sleep is a metaphor for slackness and carelessness with the way we live. What time is it? It’s no time for laziness.

But laziness with respect to what? “Salvation is nearer to us than when we first believed”. Wait! I thought we already had salvation? Well he’s talking about our ultimate salvation when we will receive our resurrected bodies and see the Lord face to face. Every day is one day closer to that day. The night is far gone; the day is at hand. The day refers to the day Jesus’ returns. The next day in God’s redemptive plan is Jesus’ return. We are commanded to prepare for that day. Jesus could come back today or this week. If you knew that Jesus was for sure coming back this Friday how would that change your life?

When is this day? Well God in His great wisdom has chosen not to reveal that time to us. So there is a day we must prepare for but we don’t know the date. We have to do this in other realms of life. If you’re a young person or a single person here today, your future might hold a wedding day. But you don’t the date and maybe not the person who will stand beside you that day. But you can still be preparing for that day by keeping yourself pure or repenting from impurity and resolving by the Spirit to remain pure from now on. You can prepare for that day on which you don’t know the date by growing in Christ and maturity. The same is true in parenting. Some of you will have a child or more children in the years to come. You can prepare for that day now by growing in Christ and maturing as a person and saving to provide for that child. All of us know that the day of our death will one day come. We just don’t know the date. So we can prepare now for that day by taking the life we’ve been giving and using it for God’s glory for as many days as He gives us.

There’s a way we must live to prepare for a day but we don’t know the date. What is this way? Paul describes this in 3 simple statements. Look at the middle of verse 12. “So then let us cast off works of darkness and put on the armor of light.” Put off you night clothes and put on your light clothes. Put off the lifestyle of night and evil and put on the lifestyle of light and God. The darkness of night is often the time when those bent on evil and mischief are particularly active. Take off the night clothes and put on God’s new set of clothes – here called the armor of light.

Then in verse 13 he spells it out for us a little more clearly. He calls us to walk properly as in the daytime. So we’re to engage in activities and behaviors that we could comfortably do whether it was night or in the middle of the town square. Walk decently not like the other actions described in verse 13. We might look at that list and say “whoa, Paul’s talking to the real party animals and out of control fringe sector of society here.” But Paul writes Christians in the Roman church. This church was made up of Jews whom we talked much about last week and Gentiles. The sins listed

in verse 13 were common practice among ordinary Gentiles in Rome. In fact, they often accompanied common pagan religious rites. But now Christians have been called out of that to live proper decent lives. Just so the Jewish Christians wouldn't think they were exempt from this sin list, he includes quarrelling and jealousy. Those are common sins among religious people. But all of these are part of the walk of darkness. Not the walk in light.

In fact we're called to put on Jesus Himself. Did you catch that in verse 14? But put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh. In response to God's mercy, clothe yourself with Christ and don't make any room for sin to continue. Because of God's great mercy, allow 0 percent of your schedule for sinning. So it's not ok to do just a little wrong to my neighbor. Could be we aim for lives that carry no shame.

This does not mean we live perfect lives. None of us do. But we wage war against our sinful nature each day and fight to make no provision for the flesh. We wage war against our sin. We hate our sin. We are remorseful over our sin. We make no provision for it. We don't help it, feed it or nurture it. We don't play with it or dabble in it. We build fences around it and call others to pray to help us fight. This is the way we prepare for the day of Christ's return and a date we don't know.

These words in verses 13 and 14 had a profound impact on a young man who was brought up as a Christian. But he rejects his family. He became a professor of rhetoric, first in Rome and then in Milan. He had long since abandoned Christian living. Instead he immersed himself in a party lifestyle that was pretty typical.

In Milan, he reentered the Christian circle, though as he had not repented from sexual promiscuity, nor did he have peace of heart. One day, in deep sadness, seated in the garden of a Christian friend, he heard a child singing, "Take up and read." Coming inside the house, he opened at random a volume of Paul's letters and read the word "not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual acts and licentiousness . . . but put on the Lord Jesus Christ.

This proved to be a life changing moment for Augustine, who later became Bishop of Hippo in North Africa and the greatest theologian of the early Christian centuries.

Our lifestyle might be one of the greatest hindrances to growing in Christ. Sometimes we need a wakeup call to stop living in the dark and come to Christ's light.

But do we really have to be so concerned about how we're living when Jesus' actually arrives? Aren't our sins forgiven? Haven't we already been justified? Won't He be forgiving? Yes – Yes – Yes. _But it's kind of like being

entrusted with a beautiful home while the owner is away. Say this owner has been very good to you. They have bailed you out of trouble. They have given you wise counsel. They have helped you begin a new life with lots of potential and opportunity. All they have asked you to do is look after their house while they're away. They'll be back at some point in the fall.

Would you want them to show up on the doorstep of the house in the middle of a wild party that destroys their house? Would you want them to arrive to the mess of a rave that you thought would be cool while they were gone? They entrusted this house to you. It's their house. Or would you want them to arrive to see their house well taken care of while they were away?

Jesus gave us a new life. He paid for us with His own blood. He's coming back one day.

So when Jesus comes back what do you want Him to find you doing? Something that will honor and please Him or something that dishonors and disgraces Him? When Jesus comes back the conquering king of all kings, do we want to be caught in some act of rebellion against Him or some action of carelessness that shows we don't fear Him or didn't really believe that He would return? Or do we want to be in the middle of caring for that child; loving our neighbor; helping someone in need; giving His hope through prayer.

Loving others fulfills God's law and will in your life. It is an appropriate response to God's mercy. It is a debt we must always pay but can never pay off. It's time to stop sleeping. Our salvation is nearer to us than when we first believed. So put off the night clothes and put on the armor of light. Make no provision for the flesh and put on Christ. You'll be ready for that day whatever date it arrives.