

The Debt of Love

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[0:00] Amen. Please be seated. Dear people of God, a new year is upon us on this first Sunday in Advent.

! And what is Advent? The word itself in theological terms means the coming or appearing of the Messiah.

Advent is the beginning of the year for those who keep a liturgical calendar. It starts on the fourth Sunday before Christmas. It is a season of waiting and preparation.

It is a penitential season because waiting and preparing for the coming of the Lord requires repentance, requires self-examination, confession, and a recommitment to God.

That, of course, answers the question of who it is that we are waiting upon. We wait for the return of the promised one, spoken of in successive prophecies to God's people.

[1:12] The one who is coming to crush the serpent's head. The true Israel who will fulfill the law.

The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. It is He who will wait upon. He indeed came. He did come into this world, a sin-riddled world.

Humbly He came through the virgin's womb. This God-man took upon Himself the sin of all who come to Him by faith.

Paying the debt we hold to God for our rebellion. Not only that, He clothes us in His perfect righteousness, through which we can call God, Abba, Father, as adopted sons and daughters.

Beloved, this is the gospel's good news. The promise of God's great rescue and redemption that is proclaimed in the Holy Scriptures.

[2:23] We in the church age, that is all of us here now, we live in the fulfillment of that promise.

So, with this dual focus in mind, surrounding Advent, we await Christmas during the season of Advent.

But in truth, that's a look back to God's great work in redemptive history, as He fulfilled that promise of coming, which He did accomplish, that is, incarnation.

More importantly, though, in Advent, we look forward, beyond Christmas, to the eschaton, that is, the last day, when He shall come, in His glorious majesty, we're told, to judge the quick and the dead, and to raise us to immortal life with Him.

That's what we're looking for. This is the dual focus of Advent. We see in the gospel lesson this morning, about Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

I wonder if you think it's out of place to read that passage in Advent. It does seem so, isn't it? It seems like a Palm Sunday reading. But note, note that it is a picture, that reading of Matthew's telling of the triumphal entry.

[3:41] It is a picture of a people welcoming the arrival of the Messiah. They cry, Hosanna to the Son of David.

But soon they will yell, Crucify Him. The lesson for us is not to be like this fickle crowd, who spurned their Messiah and His good news.

It's easy. It was easy for them to yell, Hosanna with the crowd a week before. As they cheer Jesus, they saw in Him merely the answer to their worldly problems.

They saw in Jesus a Messiah that will fill their bellies with food. A Messiah that will free them from their Roman overlords. This is the Savior they wanted.

But it was much harder for them to hear that this Messiah speaks to them of their darkened hearts, of their sin, of their greater need for a Savior who will save them.

[4:48] Not from Rome, but from the wrath of God that is to come. They didn't want to hear that. And just like today, it is far easier to rush on to Christmas without the penitential preparation of Advent.

Of course, we've already rushed on. It's part of our culture, isn't it? The minute Thanksgiving, you finish that turkey, you start celebrating Christmas. Now that's not a judgment on the way we put up, whether you should put up the tree yet or the lights yet.

But I do wonder if in our hearts, brothers and sisters, we take the time during this season of Advent for the proper preparation that God invites us to come into of self-examination, of repentance and confession, and resting in the mercy of God.

to prepare our hearts is to humbly acknowledge that there is no health in us. That we need the righteousness of another, namely Jesus Christ.

The righteousness of the spotless Lamb of God by whose sacrifice our death is taken away. But there is a way in which even people who have heard the gospel of salvation, people who have tasted, as the author of Hebrews says, the heavenly gifts, there's a way in which even those people can be drawn away into idolatry.

[6 : 22] Such was the judgment of God proclaimed to Israel by the prophet Isaiah, which we read earlier in Isaiah 1 this morning. It's a picture of a sinful nation, of people laden with iniquity, offsprings of evildoers, the prophet Isaiah says.

They had forsaken the Lord, despised the Holy One of Israel, and therefore they are under judgment. They are estranged from God.

The Lord sees through them. Although they worship at the form of godliness, it had long been empty of its power. So God said to them, What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?

I have had enough of your burnt offerings of rams. I do not delight in the blood of bulls, lambs, and goats. Bring no more vain offerings.

Incense is an abomination to me. I cannot endure the iniquity. Or your solemn assembly. Then imagine hearing these words from God.

[7 : 33] verse 15 of Isaiah chapter 1. When you spread out your hands, God said, I will hide my eyes from you. Even though you make many prayers, I will not listen.

Your hands are full of blood. This is the indictment of the prophet Isaiah. This is the judgment of God on these people. And notice that the things they are doing are the things that God commanded them to do.

The worship in Israel. The bringing the rams. The observation of the sacrifices. These are all things that God commanded them to do. But God now says to them, all of that is nothing to me.

These are vain offerings. Because your heart is far from me. God cannot be deceived.

He is the one to whom all hearts are open and no secrets are heard. We can fool one another with empty religiosity.

[8 : 41] We can offer vain offerings. And fool one another. But God sees through all of us. He sees through to the innermost part of each of our hearts.

The Apostle James in chapter 4 of his epistle writes, What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have.

So you murder. And remember what murder is. Because you might say, oh, I've never killed anyone. But what did Jesus say murder is? There's hatred in your hearts toward a brother, toward another. So you desire and do not have because you murder.

You covet and cannot obtain. So you fight and quarrel. You ask and do not receive because you ask wrongly to spend it on your passions.

This is the indictment of God against his people. Both in the Old and New Testament. judgment.

This warning, this judgment of God against false and empty worship is seen throughout the Bible.

[9 : 52] And what follows is the warning of God's coming in judgment on all of righteousness. And so, as we, in this season of Advent, await the coming of God, we must remember who it is that is coming.

He is God, the great judge, the just judge. He is coming to judge all unrighteousness. And as we've said, nothing is hidden from his eyes.

And, if we have an honest assessment of ourselves, we must admit, we cannot live in Christ's kingdom. We cannot.

We cannot live in his kingdom in our own strength. It is impossible. All our striving towards God by our own effort will always fall short.

What then must we do? What then must we do? This is why we need Advent to remind us. To remind us how to love God and how to live in harmony with one another in this sin-riddled world that

we live in.

[11:02] This is the call that Apostle Paul returns us to in Romans 13 when he says, Owe no one anything except to love each other for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.

Notice what Paul said there. Love is a debt we hold. This is an interesting way of putting it, isn't it? But it's not unfamiliar.

It's not an unfamiliar way because Jesus himself, in the parable of the unforgiving servant, speaks of love as a debt that is owed. Do you remember that parable?

And who is the debt owed to? We owe it to one another. But it is God to whom the insurmountable debt is truly owed.

We, all of us, are undeserving servants. We are the undeserving servant who has been forgiven a debt we could never repay. And then we are the best servant who has been shown great mercy.

[12:09] We are then called to show mercy to one another. We are then commanded to love and forgive one another in gratitude and as a testament to our standing as forgiving sinners ourselves.

Jesus' command for his disciples in John 6 is to love one another as he has loved us. Notice that it is a command. It is not a suggestion.

Love one another as I have loved you and by this everyone is to know we belong to him. The debt owed to God is unpayable.

We can never repay it. Yet God calls us, all of us, to daily repay this love to one another. Of course, we must take care.

We must take care to define love by God's moral standard and not according to the way the world defines love. We can claim to be full of love.

[13:15] We can. But in reality, we are eatmongers. That's what empty religiosity actually looks like. A religion that looks inward and measures my law keeping in comparison with my fellow brother.

That is the empty worship that God says he abhors, he hates in Isaiah 1. In Dostoevsky's book, The Brothers Karamazov, he's a Russian author, there's this picture of a spiritual mentor.

And this spiritual mentor tells the story of a man who confessed to him. And this is what the man said. The man says, I love mankind, but I am amazed at myself.

The more I love mankind in general, the less I love people in particular. Yes, I'm glad you saw the irony of that statement.

In my dreams, the man continued, I often went so far to think passionately of serving mankind. And it may be, I would really have gone to the cross for people if it was somehow suddenly necessary.

[14:29] And yet I am incapable of living in the same room with anyone even for two days. And as soon as someone is there close to me, his personality oppresses my self-esteem and restricts my freedom.

In 24 hours, I can begin to hate even the best of men. He concludes, on the other hand, it has always happened that the more I hate people individually, the more ardent becomes my love for humanity as a whole.

Is this not the way the secular world around us thinks of love? The world loves to speak of love in the abstract, whereas we cannot live in peace.

love in the world speaks of love. That's the message it tells. But yet there is war all around, between nations, between peoples. There's divisions all around.

But agape love, the love of God, the sacrificial, self-giving, other-focused love, love, that kind of love is powered by God.

[15:53] We love because He first loved us. And it is this same love now, brothers and sisters, that draws us away from sin and draws us away from the world.

Love always has a moral obligation. I'm going to repeat that. Love always has a moral obligation.

The world would like to tell you that love is just love.

No. Jesus said, if you love me, you will keep my commandments. It is out of His love for us that He gives us His law.

The law as summarized, we say it every Lord's day as we gather. The law summarizes this, to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind.

That's the first commandment. And the second is like it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

And that's what Isaiah calls the people of God to do in practical ways.

[17:08] He calls us to wash ourselves. He says, wash yourselves, make yourself clean. And he's not speaking of a ritual cleansing here.

He's speaking of a moral self-examination. Hence the warning, cease to do evil, learn to do good, seek justice, bring justice to the fatherless, and plead the widow's cause.

death. But all these demands are dreadful. Let me tell you why these demands are dreadful. At least it is for me. You might think differently.

But I know I cannot love my neighbor as myself. I know it. Nor can I love God with all my heart, soul, and mind. I know my sin weighs me down.

I cannot measure up to God's righteous standard. I've tried. But before I even make a start of it, I fail. I cannot in my own striving.

[18:11] This is not just my story. It is your story. And the story of every man and woman born of Adam, save Jesus Christ, who was born of the Virgin Mary. But the Lord said, even in that same Isaiah, God said, come now, let us reason together.

Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be white as snow. Though they are like crimson, they shall become like wool. It is this promise of God through the prophet Isaiah that is my hope and my assurance.

And I hope it is yours as well. It is a promise accomplished by the Lord, the giver of the promise. He came down and shed his blood on the cross at Calvary, thereby securing your freedom.

He took your sin upon himself and gave you his perfect righteousness. As the hymn writer puts it, hear his love, vast as the ocean, loving kindness as the flood, when the prince of life, our ransom, shed for us, his precious blood.

Here is love. What you and I cannot do, which is love in the particular, love our brother and sister next to us, and not just love in the abstract.

[19:41] What we cannot do, God has done for us. God has changed our hearts. And he is transforming us into his likeness.

That's what's going on in your heart and with you right now. If you've come by faith to Jesus Christ, you've been transformed. And God is changing you more and more in increasing measure into his likeness.

And guess what? He's using that brother next to you, and that sister next to you, and that one sitting behind you that you haven't talked to in a while. He's using them to do that work of transformation, in molding you into Christ's likeness.

This gracious tide has swept us up into a new life, in which we are empowered to love God and to love one another. We, of course, we do so imperfectly on this side of eternity.

We know that. But we are commanded to do so nevertheless. Our doing so is not what will secure our salvation. We have already been forgiven, ransomed, and rescued from the judgment to come by the finished work of Christ on the cross.

[20:54] Rather, our obedience to love God and to love one another is a testament that we are recipients of the divine grace through his love for us.

So, brothers and sisters, this Advent, God's love has brought us together. together. In the moment, we will welcome brothers and sisters in Christ with whom we were once one local body.

Beloved in Christ, I think it's important that we are honest before God. In the spirit of self-examination and in preparation that Advent invites us to, let us be honest with one another.

We hold one another a debt of love, as God commands. But such love requires a daily, daily, moment by moment, dying to ourselves and living for Christ.

Such love means we must be quick to forgive one another, think the best of one another, and carry one another's burdens. We, all of us here, we've come to faith in Jesus Christ.

[22:06] We've been baptized into one body with Christ Jesus as our head. A priest prayed this prayer concerning its flock.

Dear Lord, I pray that you will bless my beloved St. Andrew's Church with unity, spiritual power, whole inspiring, reverent, passionate worship, and the power to bless and transform their community for your kingdom and your glory.

I pray that we will make Christ following disciples. Amen. That was the prayer of the late Father Stephen Evans concerning his beloved church.

This is our prayer as well, brothers and sisters. Now that we are one body, may we continue to pray that prayer. May that be our testament that the Lord will bless our community with unity, spiritual

power, awe, inspiring, reverent, passionate worship, and the power to bless and transform our community.

To what end? For God's kingdom. Not for our own gain, not for our own glory, but for God's glory. That we will make and we will be Christ following disciples.

[23 : 43] Advent is an acute time in which we commit to repentance and self preparation. But in truth, brothers and sisters, the whole Christian life is Advent.

It is a hopeful, joyful waiting on the promises of God in Christ, which is to be consummated upon a second coming. This life of preparation must be one of daily dependence on God and a daily modification that is put into death our flesh and its fleshly, selfish desires.

the time, the hour has come for us to wake up from sleep, for salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed.

The night is far gone, the day is at hand. Christ the day spring, the light bringer has come. Since we belong to him by faith, true grace, beloved in Christ, let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.

We will soon pray the litany and I invite you to come with me to God in prayer. I invite you to approach God, not based on your own worthiness, but come through the merits of Jesus Christ given to you, if you have indeed put your trust in him.

[25 : 16] Let us go before him. in repentance and ask for his strength to carry us forward as we look towards his coming.

Almighty God, give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness and put upon us the armor of light. Now in the time of this mortal life in which your son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility, that in the last day when he shall come again in his glorious majesty, to judge both the quick and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, ever one God, world without end.

Amen.