

A Debtor of Love at the Dawn of Salvation

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Date: 22 August 2021

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[0 : 00] And the most obvious kind of debt that comes to mind is money. But Paul here has more than that in mind, really. In fact, in our Old Testament reading earlier, we're given examples of different types of debt.

It's not obvious from reading, but the law requires repaying when something wrong is done. So if you steal something, then you make restitution. That's a form of repaying that debt.

But if you have nothing to repay with, then you're sold as a slave as a way of repaying it, repaying in inverted commas. Likewise, if your animal damages another's field, you are to pay back with the best from your own field.

We didn't read it, but elsewhere in that same section in Exodus, there's recompense or paying back for other things as well, not just for property, but for personal injury as well.

And this is actually summed up in Exodus chapter 21 and verse 23, where we read, but if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.

[1 : 13] So what Paul has in mind here in these verses in Romans is in Romans, actually, but the law. But what does then Paul mean by this continuing debt to love one another?

Well, it certainly doesn't mean we love only those who love us. That is to repay those who love you with love. That would be to suggest that the debt of love could somehow be repaid, which we know it can't.

Sort of like if I show you love by buying you dinner, you reciprocate the next time by buying me dinner, and so we're even. Likewise, it doesn't mean we are to withhold love so that it doesn't get paid off, as if to say, I better not love you, otherwise I might risk repaying this debt of love.

Rather, Paul says, there's a continuing debt to love others because it's an obligation that we can never repay. No matter how much we love, there's still an ongoing debt.

And that's why we need to keep loving as though we're trying to repay it, even though we know we can't. Now, as I say, it's Paul's use of poetic language here.

[2 : 30] He's not trying to weigh us down with the burden of knowing that this is a debt that we can never repay. Rather, he's showing us the extent of the love that we've received in the first place that created that so-called debt.

For God has poured out His infinite love for us. By sending His Son to die for us. And He continues to do that, actually, by giving us His Spirit, who continues to work in our lives, showing us God's love.

So that's the debt, if you like. But it's not really for us then to repay it. And this was the same, actually, with Israel. When God rescued them from slavery in Egypt, He chose them as His people without them doing anything for it.

And then He established a covenant relationship with them to make permanent His love for them. The flip side, then, is that He gave them His law.

Not as a way for them to have to repay His love, but rather so that they too can respond to Him in love. Which is why Paul is able here to connect love with the law.

[3 : 45] Loving others, he says, is the key to fulfilling the law. Jesus Himself summed it up in the two great commandments in the Gospels. To love the law with all your heart, on the one hand.

And then secondly, to love others as yourself. And so Paul continues here in verse 9. The commandments, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not covet, and whatever other command there may be are summed up in this one command.

Love your neighbor as yourself. Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore, love is the fulfillment of the law. And so let's think a bit more about this relationship between love and law.

And as I said, the law was given to allow Israel to express their continuing debt of love to God. Part of which came through loving others.

But for us who are Christians, Paul already has explained that we are no longer under the law. So earlier in Romans chapter 7 and verse 4, Paul says that we have died to the law through the body of Christ.

[4 : 52] Instead, in Christ, our obligation now is to love. We love instead of having to obey the law. But as we do, we also fulfill the law in the sense that we express what was at the very heart of the law in the first place.

That of love. Of course, we don't love in order to earn our salvation as if we could repay that debt that God has shown us. Just as we saw a few weeks ago where Paul urges us to offer our bodies as living sacrifices, that's Romans chapter 12, in light of God's mercy to us.

So now in this passage, the language is about responding to God's infinite love by loving others in return. So again, let me repeat that this language of debt here is not an obligation to repay God's love to him.

We can't, even with retriied. God's gift of his son and the death that he died is immense that we can't pay it back.

But it's also free, freely given. And the right response to it is not to repay it, but to put our faith in Jesus. And so we are saved by grace, that's free gift, through faith, through faith, not through the repaying of debt.

[6 : 18] But Paul's use of this poetic language here is his way of saying, in view of God's infinite love shown to us, let us love, respond in love, just like he does.

And let us do it generously, without stopping to think, when is it going to end? First, by loving him and being loyal and faithful to him, just as he is to us, but second, by loving others in the same way that he loves us.

And each of us needs to consider individually what this looks like in our lives. What is God prompting you to do in light of his love for you?

How can we be loving to others? It's good conceptually to think that we should love, but in order to really practice love, we need to apply this specifically to our lives.

And so I'll leave you to reflect on that for yourselves. And later, Jeff and Steph will come up to stimulate your thinking in that area. And I know at the moment that lockdown presents challenges for us.

[7 : 29] Not only are we not able to get out to love people, but we ourselves may feel like now's the time when I really need love instead of having to love others. But I'm sure that even despite this lockdown, God is still able to give us that strength to love, and we should.

And so, for example, if you are living with others, then it does take love, doesn't it, to be spending 24-7 with the same people all the time, at their worst and at our worst.

And yet, God would like us perhaps to be more loving to the people we're living with. If, however, you're living alone, then the challenge is how do we look beyond our isolation?

How do we look beyond our own feelings of loneliness and make that extra effort to love others even with the restrictions in place? And so, yes, I admit that lockdown has made things harder, but Paul, in the next section, gives us the motivation as to how to keep going.

He says we need to understand the times in which we live. For as Christians, we live at the dawn of salvation. So let me continue in verse 11 where Paul says, and do this, that is, do all that I've just been talking about, understanding the present time.

[8 : 58] The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over. The day is almost here.

He has yet more poetic language by Paul, but he compares our lives when we still lived under the judgment of sin and death as being that of living in the night. We lived in moral darkness and therefore in sin.

And so, as we know so well from Uncle Colin, take it away, James and Jackson. A Roman 6, 23, for the wages of sin is debt, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen. All right, it's your turn. Do it. A Roman 6, let him drain, for the wages of sin is debt.

The gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. All right, thank you, Uncle Colin.

[10 : 34] I don't know whether you were bopping there at home or not, but certainly, James and Jackson, if only we could put a camera on them, they were certainly waving their hands and bopping up and down right at the back.

so. But my point is, apart from this light relief, although it is the Bible and those are God's words, is that we have the same duality here as well, isn't it, as between chapter 6 and here in Romans chapter 13.

Death in Romans 6, 23 is associated with the night here in Romans 13, while eternal life in Romans 6, 23 corresponds to the day of salvation here.

And yet, I think Paul here gives us the sense that we're not fully in the day yet. Yes, we have eternal life. Morning has broken, but the final and complete salvation is still not fully arrived.

And that's because we're not in the new creation yet, even though it's certainly nearer than when we first believed. And so, as Christians, we can experience a sense of anticipation, yes.

[11 : 44] This new creation which we have in terms of eternal life now, spiritually, we don't have it yet physically. And yet, that sort of in-between gives us a feeling of dissatisfaction as well.

It's almost rather like how we're living now, aren't we, in these lockdowns. Each time, there's an anticipation that we're going to come out of it, and yet, it's proven not to last.

And now, in this, our sixth lockdown, with the cases still bubbling along, there is this despairing sense of how long is this going to go for. And the truth is, nobody knows.

And that makes us all feel like we're living in limbo. And sometimes, as a Christian, that's how we feel about life now, doesn't it? We believe in Jesus, we know the Bible promises us salvation, and yet, we still live in this life where there's sickness and suffering and sin.

When is it all going to end? And that's exactly how it feels, and that's okay. But that's exactly what the crack of dawn really is like, isn't it?

[12:54] I'm not sure how many of you have experienced it, stood at the horizon, but here's an image of it on the next slide. If you've ever been there, you'll see that the first ray of sunshine at dawn pierces the sky, doesn't it?

And yet, the shadow or the darkness like death still hangs over the landscape. And that's the same with us in the Christian life, isn't it? The light of Christ has indeed shone through, he's risen from the dead, hallelujah, we can see it by faith, and yet we don't know when this final salvation will come.

And yet, even though we don't know exactly when, Paul urges us to see that it's inevitable. It will definitely come, he says here. Just like when you see the sun pierce through the dawn, you know that it's not going to go back down again and reverse itself and set again, is it?

No. And so Paul says, knowing this, let's press ahead into the day. Let us put behind us what belongs to the night. And so from the second half of verse 12, Paul spells this out.

there are three pairs of do's and don'ts. The first is to put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Then second, we are to behave decently as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy.

[14:22] And again, one belongs to the day, the other belongs to the night. And then thirdly, rather clothe yourself with the Lord Jesus Christ and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh.

And so to put on the armor of light, to behave decently, to clothe ourselves with Christ are all different ways of saying the same thing. It's about living in the light of day because we have God's spirit with us, giving us eternal life.

The opposite is to continue in the deeds of darkness, that of carousing, drunkenness, sexual immorality, debauchery, dissension, and jealousy. These are all examples of gratifying the desires of the flesh.

And it's no coincidence that things like carousing and drunkenness are often literally done at night. But Paul is here being metaphorical as well. This is not an exhaustive list.

So don't think that as long as you're not the drunken party going type, that this warning doesn't apply to you. after all, if you look, dissension and jealousy is on the list as well.

[15:31] Instead, the common thread that ties all these examples together is that they're all actions that stem from a selfish lifestyle, that of gratifying the desires of the flesh.

That means living only to please yourself. But that's just anathema, that's just the real opposite of who we are as Christians. In Romans 8, we've already been told we are to live according to the spirit, not according to the flesh.

And that means here we are to clothe ourselves with Christ. We perform deeds of love that are in keeping with Christ's character. And so you see, the light of Christ isn't just in the distant horizon as in that scene, it's also with us spiritually now by his spirit.

And that's why Paul can say you can put on the armor of light because the light is with us now. We have the power to live as though we're in the new creation, physically.

Because spiritually, we are in the new creation. We're able to love others just as Christ does. Now I know that given how long we've been living through lockdown, that we've often gotten this habit now, don't we?

[16:47] I mean, I can say for myself that we just spend most of our days now in our tracky decks or jammies, our bed clothes in other words. But that's not normal for us, is it?

Normally if we're allowed out for work or socially, we'd get dressed very soon. The moment we wake up, after we've brushed our teeth, before we have our breakfast even, we'll put on our going out clothes.

Why? Because we know the night has passed, we're getting out of our beds, the day is upon us, we've got to get dressed to be ready for the day, don't we? Well, that's the same with us as Christians.

We live at the dawn of salvation. It's time to leave the night of death behind us. Get out of our slumbers, Paul says, for the day lies ahead of us.

And Paul says, now is the time to be clothed with Christ. We have his spirit, a resurrection life. We have his spirit. spirit. So let's use it to put on his character of love and show with it the deeds of love.

- [17:55] After all, that's where we're headed for eternity. A time is soon coming where we will spend forever in Christ's robes of righteousness.

We will be transformed into his likeness permanently, just like him. And we may think it's a long time away, but in the context of eternity, our earthly lives now are but the blink of an eye, really.

And this lockdown that we're in, yes, 200 days and counting, is even shorter than that blink of eye. And so we have that daily choice to make, don't we, as we get up each morning.

Whether we stay in our spiritual jammies, which belongs to the past, or put on Christ, which is what we are for eternity. And whilst we're in lockdown, yes, we can stay in our physical jammies, but God wants us to put on, not keep putting on our spiritual jammies, but get out of those clothes and put on Christ each and every morning as we wake up.

And I know it may be hard to imagine this, but this despairing period of lockdown, it will soon be over one day. But more than that, so will our earthly lives after that.

- [19:16] And then brothers and sisters in Christ, we'll be in God's glorious new creation forever. Just think about that. We're going to be in God's new creation forever, living in glory for eternity.

Eternity. And so with that in mind, Paul says we can live as children of the new creation now, putting on Christ, laying aside our selfish desires of the flesh, and turning instead to love others selflessly, just as Christ has done for us.

Let's pray. Father, help us to understand the times that we are in, that the night has passed and the day is coming, that our salvation is nearer than when we first believed.

Teach us to put on Christ, teach us to commit to the continuing debt of loving others, teach us to love just as you have loved us in Christ Jesus.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.