

Debt of Love

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Preacher: Canon David Short

[0 : 00] Help us, we turn to his word. Would you bow your heads in prayer, please? Our Heavenly Father, we've just stated again that we believe in the Holy Spirit.

We now ask that you would send your Spirit, that he would draw our hearts and affection and love toward the Lord Jesus Christ, so that we might know what it is to put on the Lord Jesus Christ and in this way be enabled to love one another.

For we ask this in his name. Amen. Please sit down. If you were to open your Bibles to the passage Bethan just read, again Romans 13, page 948.

As you do that, I'll tell you a little story. When I was first working at St. John's, this is a Ben Buan story. Ben went to be with Christ a few years ago. He was one of the trustees.

And I was at a trustees meeting and the meetings always started with a short Bible study done by one of the clergy. And the preacher from the previous Sunday gave a very eloquent summary of his sermon.

[1 : 14] And at the end of his study, there was a long silence. And Ben said, yes, he said, that's all very well, but how's that supposed to work on Monday?

And I was very glad he said it and I was very glad it wasn't me who led the study. I think the apostle Paul would have agreed because all the high-sounding theology in the world is just words unless it works on Monday, unless it's real in the real world, in the circumstances of our daily lives.

And the last quarter of Romans, from chapter 12 onward, is Monday Christianity, Monday to Saturday Christianity. It shows us what the resurrection of Jesus and justification by faith and the gift of the Spirit and no condemnation, it shows the difference it ought to make in our daily lives.

And the central characteristic of the Christian life, the essential mark of the Christian, as we've seen, is love. Love for brothers and sisters in the church. Love for neighbours.

Love for those who hate us and persecute us. Love for the authorities and the government. And in these last two paragraphs that Beethan read to us, Paul returns to the love of neighbour and explains the spiritual energy that empowers us and enables us to love in this way.

[2 : 48] I've called the first paragraph, verses 9 to 12, Love and Law. And you may not know this, but this is the last time that Paul returns to the topic of the law in all of the book of Romans.

And in these little verses, 9, 10, 11 and 12, there's a three-fold emphasis on loving your neighbour and a three-fold emphasis on how that fulfils the law.

So look at verse 9. Let love be... I'm sorry, verses 8 to 10. Owe to no one anything except to love each other, for the one that loves another, literally neighbour, has fulfilled the law, is fulfilling the law.

Last week, in the first seven verses of chapter 13, we heard that we had a debt and an obligation to the governing authorities. But that's a limited liability because you can write down your responsibility to the governing authorities and you can say whether you've done it or not.

This is different. When it comes to our neighbours and not just Christians, we have an ongoing obligation and an ongoing debt that we can never fully repay in this life to love the specific human individual whom God has set before us.

[4 : 16] Which also means, by the way, that there's no such thing as a perfect Christian. We've always got this obligation. And as we seek to do this and live under this obligation, we fulfil the law of God.

Now, I know you're thinking, we know by now in Romans that obeying the law is not the way to justification. Obeying the law is also not the way to sanctification. But it is the way to fulfilling the law.

Because this love that is spoken of here is not just an ordinary human love. It's not what we'd call compassion. It's something completely supernatural.

It's not the slogans we hear about in the songs or the movies. It's not something that arises from our feelings. It's a choice word. It's something from the will. And it's something that we do not have the resources within us to achieve.

It is the gift of love which comes directly from the Holy Spirit. You remember back in chapter 5? God's love is now being poured, ongoingly poured, into our hearts by the Holy Spirit who lives within us.

[5 : 31] This love doesn't contradict the law. For the Christian, the law is not obsolete. We fulfill the law. And I know it might sound spiritual to say, look, I don't need the Ten Commandments.

I just flow with the Spirit. That's not really New Testament Christianity. Just look at verse 9, for example. The commandments, you shall not commit adultery, murder, steal, covet, and any other commandment are summed up in this word.

You shall love your neighbor as yourself. See, God hasn't changed his mind on the Ten Commandments. If you take away law, love is meaningless.

It just becomes whatever I feel I want to do or it should be. And in the end, I end up loving just myself. And if you reflect on this, it's amazing how perverse we are about this whole thing.

We haven't just taken over the whole idea of love from God and separated it from him. We've actually reversed its meaning by taking out the law. I mean, just take adultery, for example.

[6 : 40] What's the one reason people give for committing adultery? I'm in love. You see, if you take away the law, you can say and do what you like.

But if love is fulfilling the law, then you can't drive a wedge between God's commandments and this supernatural love. You cannot break the commandments in the name of love, as I believe the Anglican Church in North America is trying to do.

I mean, if I convince myself that my adultery is justified because of love, I haven't understood God's view of love. As Jesus himself said, if you love me, you will obey my commandments.

commandments. That's how love shows itself. The thing is that, you know, on their own, the commandments have no power to help me and make me obey.

The obedience comes from the renewed mind. It comes from being freed from my sin, knowing the sentence of no condemnation. It comes from the person of the Holy Spirit living in me.

[7 : 51] So I want you to think of the specific people you work with or play with or the people who live next door to you or across the way from you. The person who God has placed before you.

That is the person who you and I are to love in this way. Maybe the person has need. And loving that person is not just restraining yourself from doing bad things to them.

It's seeking their highest spiritual good. Now, let me say at this point, I don't know about you, but I find this language a little bit overwhelming, particularly because with the click of one button on the internet, I can see the most terrifying suffering all around the world.

And it is helpful, I think, that the apostle here makes love very specific. He doesn't say, love the world. He says, love your neighbour, the person who you confront.

And the obvious question for us is how do we do that? And the surprising answer is the apostle tells us in verses 11 to 14, not how, he tells us when and who.

[9 : 09] So if the first paragraph I'd title Love and Law, the second paragraph, when and who, he begins with when and he wants the Roman Christians and he wants us to know what time it is.

Verse 11, besides this, you know the time that the hour has come for you to wake up from sleep, literally be raised from sleep.

For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believe, the night is far gone, the day is at hand. Now as Christians, we live in this wonderfully strange situation.

We live in this age, this time, this world and it is passing away, it's temporary and we live in this age in bodies that will die and are dying after about 16 I'm told.

But as we live in this age, we know that what is eternal has entered our space and time in the person of Jesus Christ. He has come as light into the darkness and when he rose from the dead, the light dawned, the new age, the age of eternity entered the old age.

[10 : 27] So now you and I live in the overlap of two ages, this is where we are here. We live in an interim time, we still live in the old age of darkness, the night is not over, Paul just said, and yet the day has dawned, the light has dawned, we can see Jesus Christ, our light and our saviour, who's

been raised in our hearts, giving us new life and new hope.

So we are very strange people in this world. We live in an interim time, we live here, engaged here in this old age with the things of death, but our true hope and our true desires are more and more drawn towards there.

Here's the question, how does knowing that help me love people? I mean, how does knowing the time empower me to not take vengeance on my enemies or to be aglow with the Holy Spirit, to overcome evil with good?

And last month there was a wonderful illustration of a news story and this is the story of a woman named Rita Crescien, who's in the mid-50s and a husband from Penticton, who drove their minivan to a trade show in Las Vegas.

You remember this? And they got lost and stuck in the mud somewhere in nowhere's land in Nevada, in ranch country. And on the third day, her husband, Rita's husband, took his GPS and went for help and he's not been found yet.

[11 : 58] This was, I think, at the end of March. for seven weeks, Mrs.

Crescien survived in desperate fashion. She had in the car a little bit of trail mix and some candy and each day she'd walk to a stream to get water.

But in the final week, she was so weak and had no strength, she had to settle for the water that was in the muddy puddles on the ground.

She put up colourful signs on the windows, please help, please help. She covered the van, the Chevy Astro minivan with bright blankets every morning, hoping for help.

And for seven weeks, she waited, literally dying. And on May the 8th, after seven weeks, three outdoor enthusiasts, who happened to be riding through this back country on their ATVs, all-terrain vehicles, motorbikes with four wheels, I'm told, they came across the Chevy Astro minivan and they stopped.

[13 : 14] And Mrs. Kreshian looked out and they called out, you okay? And she said, no, I'm not okay. And she could barely get her words out. And when they saw the signs on the windows and the blankets on the car, the gravity of the situation soon became apparent and how weak she was.

And she burst into tears and she said, thank God I'm going to live. So they offered her all the supplies that they had, bottles of water, bag of Doritos and some beef jerky.

Mm-mm. There was no cell coverage of course and she was far too weak to put on one of the ATVs behind one of them.

She couldn't hold on. So they asked her if she would be okay for just one hour while they rode off to get help. And she said yes.

So they rode off to the nearest ranch several miles away. They called in the sheriff's helicopter and then they tore back to the minivan and they were away just one hour.

[14 : 17] Then I read this from the news report. When they returned they were shocked by what they saw. Kretchen had taken down the blankets, ripped down the pieces of paper from the windshield, she had her purse slung over her shoulder and the suitcases neatly packed and ready to go.

She even appeared to have fixed up her hair. Quote, she was smiling, she was happy, one of the three recalled. As the paramedics attended her, Kretchen handed the family their bag of Dorito chips neatly rolled up and clipped at the top.

Her spirits were described as extremely high. It's a wonderful story. And I want you to think about Mrs. Kretchen before those three arrived. What was life about?

It was just about survival. In the end it drove her to drink in the dirty puddles and the muddy puddles. But when the rescuers came everything changed for her. She still had an hour to wait for her full rescue but knowing they were coming back with the cavalry gave her a tremendous freedom.

Despite the reality of her suffering, suddenly her suffering took on a new perspective, enabled her to take down all her self-protection, all her attempts to save herself, to dress and to live during that interim period in the light of the soon coming of the great rescue.

[15 : 44] See, once you know your life is temporary, short, even with great difficulty, if you know you are about to be truly saved and the big life is coming, it radically changes how you relate to your current circumstances.

Think about Mrs. Chrétien in that interim time, in that one hour. She had to live on faith and hope. She had to believe they were reliable, didn't she?

It completely changed her attitude and her behaviour and her demeanour and her heart. She fed off hope during this time and at 30 minutes, she knew that her salvation was closer to her than when she first met the rescuers and heard their promise to save her.

It's just a brilliant picture of the Christian life and the strange position we are in. Christ has come to save us. We were lost in sin and death and evil.

He came into our world and he shone with all the glory of God. He was raised from the dead and after he was raised from the dead, I'm sorry, before he was raised from the dead, he said, I am going to prepare a place for you and I will return and take you to be with me in that day of full salvation where death will be done away with, darkness will be done away with, our bodies will be raised and redeemed and remade eternal and creation itself will be reborn under the rule of God.

[17:16] Now we wait the full salvation with the certainty of Jesus' promise. But you and I, we're still living in the old age. We still live in the Chevy Astro minivan and our focus is not scrounging for dirty water and muddy puddles or putting up blankets.

Our purpose is preparing for the real thing. If there is no dawn, if there is no real full salvation coming, if Jesus has not been raised from the dead, then this is all that there is.

if he's a liar or mistaken or he's not really Lord, there's no real motive for us to love sacrificially or to put on different behaviour or to live with deep hope.

We are deluded. If this is all there is, we may as well eat, drink and be merry and try and make our Chevy Astro the best one in the woods. And I think this partly explains the despair amongst many young people in our culture today.

They see their parents' lifestyle dedicated to pursuing trivialities, work, work, work, money, big house, car. They see it doesn't make their parents happy and it doesn't keep marriages together and they feel under pressure, cultural pressure and parental pressure to get on the same treadmill and many kids won't buy it.

[18:39] They study and work and they get to the end of their degree and they say, what have I done this for? But you see, if the dawn is breaking, if the hope is real, if salvation is coming and you and I belong to the light, we will look at this interim time very differently with very different eyes.

Like Mrs. Creshen, even though she was not fully rescued, she was free from thinking that this is all there is. She was free from being dominated by just surviving.

That's why Paul uses these time words of urgency. The hour is coming, it's nearer now, the night is far gone, the day is at hand. The Lord Jesus has come.

And what it means is this, if Christ has come and if you belong to him and if you belong to the new age, it means you and I do not have to have it all in this life.

life. We don't need to do it all, we don't need to experience it all, we don't need to have a bucket list because the true life is coming. Life is not about the accumulation of possessions or awards, it's not about having the best minivan in the woods, it's not drinking from the best puddle, life is about him, the one who loved me, gave himself for me and lives in me by his Holy Spirit.

[20:04] So you see, the coming of dawn frees us to love others because we are okay with the fact that we're not going to have it all here. In fact, we're happy not to have it all here so as to love others because we've been so loved.

What does that look like? Verse 12, second line. So then, let's cast off the works of darkness and put on the weapons of light, literally.

Let's walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, nor in quarrelling and jealousy. Very helpful, isn't it, that Paul tells the Christians in Rome to wake up.

Do you find it encouraging to know there were some sleepy Christians in Rome even in those days? He says, wake up. He says, the night, it's nearly over. We're still in it. It's in the last moment.

The full day of light is now in the process of coming. This is no time to be half asleep. The darkness, it keeps pulling at us. And in verse 13, those three couplets are just illustrations of behaviours that belong to darkness.

[21:13] Orgies and drunkenness are binge drinking, all night raving, something that you see very much on the rise in the UK amongst young women.

Any form of substance abuse or addiction. sexual immorality and sensuality, literally sexual intercourse, just indiscriminate, unboundaried. And ancient Roman scholars tell us that by the time, by 57, when this book was written, it was common practice to have banquets and drinking bouts which were followed by what was called after dinners, where both husband and wife, if they desired, would have sex with someone else at a different table at the meal, with the open encouragement of their partner.

And the word sensuality would roughly, it would take in internet pornography if such a thing existed in those days. And quarrelling and jealousy, that's wanting to have it all, to have what others do, wanting to win, putting others down for self-gain.

And this is included alongside orgies, which I think is very helpful. Because the works of darkness are not just physical, they can be motives of the heart.

And these are the opposite of living in the light, opposite of love. They're all behaviours which are self-centred and self-pleasing and they all take some planning. You notice the last phrase in verse 14, Paul says, make no provision for the flesh, literally for its desires.

[22 : 53] And these lists of sins, these works of darkness, are things that you have to think about beforehand. I mean, you don't find yourself at an orgy by accident. Well, probably you don't, but you certainly don't participate in an orgy by accident.

You have to make a decision. And you have to feed your mind with a desire and to dwell on it. And Paul says you have to make no provision for the flesh. This is a present clear danger and temptation for the Christians in Rome.

It was difficult for them to break away from their lifestyle. Things were expected of them. Do we go to the banquet and then leave halfway through? I mean, these are tricky questions and they still are today for many of us.

But where does the power come from? Or who does it come from? And I come to this beautiful phrase at the end of the passage. Verse 14. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ.

Make no provision for the flesh for its desires. If anything we've learned from Romans is that we are very, very weak. I hope you believe that about yourself.

[24 : 06] That we just don't have the resources and the power and the strength in ourselves to break away from darkness and death. We can't justify ourselves before God. We can't rid ourselves of guilt by working hard.

We can't love others as God would have us just in our own strength. What we do and what we're commanded to do is to put on the Lord Jesus Christ.

This is just magnificent. If you forget everything else this morning, please remember this. I cannot be transformed by trying to transform myself. I cannot have a renewed mind by trying to do it myself.

These things come from outside us, from Jesus, as we put him on. It's a fantastic picture. Like clothing, it's the reverse side of being united with Christ.

You remember in chapter 6 what God has done is he's joined us to Christ Jesus. We are in his body. We are spiritually united to Christ so that all that belongs to Jesus now belongs to us as well.

[25 : 11] Well this is our part. To put on the Lord Jesus Christ is not automatic or involuntary. It's something that we do. It's a spiritual discipline to do every day and each hour.

It's not possible to put off the works of darkness by trying. We have to deliberately place ourselves in Jesus Christ and put him on. We have to secure every side, every part of our lives with the person of Jesus so that there are no secret areas where we permit ourselves, license and tolerate or mollycoddle our desires.

So the Christian life is not empty moralising. It's bringing the light of Jesus Christ in all my circumstances, the good and the bad. When I put on the Lord Jesus Christ, I look at you through his eyes.

I look at you through Christ. I look at my life and my work and my contribution through Jesus Christ. I look at what I'm doing and how I'm doing it through Jesus Christ. And how do we put on Jesus Christ?

Well I think like so many things in the Bible, it's very simple and understandable at one level and as deep as the ocean. I've been thinking about this for a long time.

[26 : 28] I'm not sure how to put it into words. I know this, that it's an intentional drawing on his power and his grace and not keeping anything away from him.

You can't put Jesus Christ on and put on the works of darkness at the same time. So when temptation first arises, say jealousy, the first thing I do is I remind myself this life is passing away. I don't really need that thing anyway or that gift or whatever. And then by faith I look at Jesus and I contemplate Jesus and I see his character and his beauty and I realise he is more than I could desire.

So by prayer I think it is, we bind Jesus to us. It means every time you think of it, calling on him, resting on him, trusting in him, abiding in him, taking your attitudes and decisions from the word of God, praying that God would make you more like him, conform you to his image and not to this age. It's asking him, please renew my mind and transform me, taking God's word into my heart and meditating so I know Jesus more until he becomes the focus of my affections.

[27 : 48] Because so many of the decisions we make are very complex. So put on the Lord Jesus Christ. Well I want to conclude and I would like to conclude with the story of Augustine.

Many of you will know that he is one of the most brilliant men in Christian history and he became a Christian through the last two verses in Romans 13. It was the summer of 386 AD.

Augustine was a rising star, a rhetorician, a philosopher, a speaker, had a teaching position in Milan but he had a godly mother who had been praying for him. And he describes his conversion in the most amazing book called The Confessions.

We get a deep picture of his deep anguish as he wrestled with Christ. This is him writing before his conversion. He says, I was sick and tormented and you, O Lord, pressed upon me in my inmost heart with a severe mercy.

He tells us what was keeping him from Christ. It was in fact my old mistresses. Trifles of trifles and vanity of vanities who still enthralled me.

[29 : 01] They tugged at my fleshly garments and softly whispered, are you going to part with this and from that moment will never be with you anymore? From that moment will not this and that be forbidden to you forever?

And he describes how the very day he was struggling with this and he began weeping and he went outside and he fell down under a fig tree, weeping and weeping.

And when his voice lowered, he could hear a child from next door singing a children's song saying, take and read, take and read. So he did and the scroll of Paul opened at Romans 13, 13 and 14 and he read these verses put on the Lord Jesus Christ.

And he says this, instantly as that sentence ended, there was infused in my heart something like the light of full certainty and all the gloom of doubt vanished away.

And he writes later in the confessions this, and the confessions are written to God, to Christ. He says, Oh Christ Jesus, my strength and my redeemer, how sweet did it suddenly become to me to be without the sweetness of trifles.

[30 : 18] It was now a joy to put away what I formerly feared to lose. You cast them away from me, oh true and highest sweetness. You cast them away and in their place you entered in yourself, sweeter than all pleasure, though not to flesh and blood, brighter than all light, but more veiled than all mystery, more exalted than all honour, though not to them that are exalted in their own eyes.

Now was my soul free from the gnawing cares of seeking and getting, of wallowing in the mire and scratching the itch of lust. And I prattle like a child to you, oh Lord my God, my light, my riches, and my salvation.

It's a wonderful picture of putting on the Lord Jesus Christ, isn't it? And we should do the same. So let's pray, let's kneel for prayer, and as Graham comes and leads us, I'll first pray a prayer from Augustine himself.

Amen. My God, let me know and love you so that I might find my happiness in you.

Enable me to know you more ever on earth so that I may know you perfectly in heaven. Enable me to love you ever more on earth so that I might love you perfectly in heaven.

[31 : 50] And in the meantime, let my mind dwell on that happiness and my tongue speak of it, my heart pine for it, my mouth pronounce it, my soul hunger for it, my flesh thirst for it, and my entire being desire it until I enter through death in the joy of my Lord forever.

Amen.