

The Continuing Debt

Romans 13:8-14

Sept. 11, 2011

Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman, has fulfilled the law. The commandments, "Do not commit adultery," "Do not murder," "Do not steal," "Do not covet," and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.

And do this, understanding the present time. The hour has 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. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature.

Romans 13:8-14 (NIV)

Video - "I Believe" 9/11 Tribute

It is hard to believe that it has been 10 years since Sept. 11, 2001. For some it seems just like yesterday, for others it seems like it has been a long time off. As someone who was there is person, in many ways it seems just a blur. As humans we have the capacity to easily forget.

It is not so easy to forget for those who lost loved ones. The number of people killed in the attack - 2,819. Of those, 343 were firefighters and paramedics, 60 were police officers. Maybe even more difficult to handle for those who lost loved ones, of the 2,819 killed, only 10%, or 289 bodies were ever recovered.

But it isn't just those that lost their lives on Sept. 11, 2001. How about all those who have lost their lives in America's response to the events of that day. The number of U.S. soldiers who have given their lives in the ten years since 9/11- in Iraq and Afghanistan - now excess of 6,000 and continuing to grow every day. The number seriously wounded - 33, 000+. The number of Iraqi's & Afghanistan's who have been killed? Nobody really knows. Very conservative estimates put it over 100,000.

Sept. 11, 2001 and all the events that have followed in the ten years since, including America's response to the attack, should be a reminder that we live in a very broken, sinful, dark world. We are reminded this morning in our Scripture from the apostle Paul:

And do this, understanding the present time. The hour has 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. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light.

Romans 13:11-12 (NIV)

Two weeks ago we looked at Paul's radical command to Christians found in Romans 12 to love our enemies, bless them instead of curse them, not to repay evil with evil but to overcome evil with good. "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord" (Romans 12:18). That is our call as Christians, that which we looked at two weeks ago. Is it easy? No! In fact, I said without the Holy Spirit, it is impossible.

Then last week we moved into Romans 13 and Paul talks about our relationship with the authorities or government. As Christians the two passages offer quite a bit of ambiguity or tension, especially if we find ourselves in a nation which claims to be "Christian." A kingdom of this world wanting or claiming to be the kingdom of God. In Romans 13 Paul says that we are to submit to the governing authorities. But Paul also wrote in his letter to the Christians at Ephesus:

For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world. . .

Ephesians 6:12 (NIV)

When Paul says "understanding the present time," it is important for us to understand that he is not talking about a specific date or time (chronos or chronological time), he is talking about a period of time (kairos).

The time that Paul is talking about is the time period between Jesus' first coming, his death on the cross, his resurrection and then his ascension back into heaven, the time period between all that occurring, and Jesus' second coming, when God will establish the new kingdom in its fullness, on heaven and on earth. A time of judgement as well. The time period that Paul was talking about when he wrote this letter to the believers in Rome is the same time period in which we find ourselves in today. As far as the exact time and date, Jesus told us not to be concerned: "It is not for you to know the [exact] times or dates the Father has set by his own authority" (Acts 1:7), chronological time. But he did say we should be able to interpret the signs of the times - kairos time. And that is the same thing that Paul is saying here: "understanding the present time."

What time is it? Well, while we do not know the exact hour of Christ's second coming, this we do know, we are 2,000 years closer to it than when Paul wrote his letter to Rome. Every day we live, we come one day closer to the 2nd coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, the final events in God's redemptive plan. Every day we live we are one day closer to our own death here on earth. A day that none of us knows, only God. In the New Testament, the term day is often used to signify the dawning of a new day, that being Christ's coming and his return, contrasted to the night of human's spiritual darkness which is almost over.

If we truly understand the times we are in, then it should not come as a surprise to us that the world as a whole is not becoming more godly and peaceful, but more ungodly and violent. The question for each of us is "which are we becoming?" Are we putting aside the deeds of darkness - which Paul here describes as sexual promiscuity, sensuality, drunkenness, and strife, and

quarreling, and jealousy. In no way is Paul trying to limit our sins here. He's telling us to put aside all our sin, referred to as "the deeds of darkness," and to put on the armor of light, otherwise referred to as the clothing of Jesus Christ.

He tells us to "leave no debt outstanding." Debt is a pretty popular word these days. A debt is something we owe or a feeling of gratitude for something received. What is it that we are indebted to? Or what do we owe are debt on? We owe our debt to God for what He has done for us through His own Son, Jesus Christ, and His death on the cross.

In the previous verses in Romans 13, those which Alex looked at last week, Paul had been speaking about paying taxes. In our verses this morning Paul writes, "Let no debt remain outstanding except the continuing debt to love one another." Completely apart from any financial obligations one might have, all believers have the constant obligation to "love one another." It is the one debt that we are constantly to pay against but can never pay off. One of the early church Father's, Origen, wrote around the year 200 A.D., "the debt of love remains with us permanently and never leaves us. This is a debt which we pay every day and forever owe."

The disciple John wrote:

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. 1 John 4:7-11 (NIV)

The challenge here is that "the continuing debt to love one another," does not just apply to our brothers and sisters in Christ, or our family members, or those we like. It also applies to unbelievers, those that we dislike, and even our enemies. Jesus said, "you have heard that it was said, 'you shall love your neighbor, and hate your enemy,' but I say to you, love your enemies . . ." (Matthew 5:44).

The greatest test of "love," as defined by God, is the willingness of one to sacrifice his or her own needs and welfare for the needs and welfare of others, even to the point of forfeiting or sacrificing one's life if necessary. "Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13).

As I have asked before, is the type of love that is defined by God humanly possible? The answer is no. As Paul wrote earlier in his letter to his brothers and sisters in Christ in Rome, "because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us" (Romans 5:5).

Paul tells us to “clothe ourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 13:14). Other versions just say, to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ.” In my study this week I came across this anonymous poem:

When I stand at the judgment seat of Christ,
 and He shows His plan for me,
 The plan of my life as it might have been,
 and I see how I blocked Him here
 And checked Him there,
 and would not yield my will.
 Will there be grief in my Savior’s eyes,
 grief though He loves me still?
 He would have me rich,
 but I stand there poor,
 Stripped of all but His grace,
 while memory runs like a haunted thing
 Down a path I cannot retrace;
 then my desolate heart
 Will well nigh break
 with tears I cannot shed.
 I will cover my face with my empty hands,
 I will bow my uncrowned head.
 O Lord, of the years that are left to me,
 I give them to Thy hand.
 Take me and break me and mold me
 to the pattern Thou hast planned.

The tragic events of ten years ago remind us that we do indeed live in a very broken and dark world. As with many of the other tragic events in which we encounter in this world, it is not the events that define us, but our responses to those events. As Christians our responses are supposed to be different than the rest of the world’s. Dr. Will Willimon is a bishop in the United Methodist Church, one of the most respected preacher’s in the last 20 years, former chaplain at Duke University. He was recently asked by *Christianity Today* magazine, “How has 9/11/2001 changed you?” Dr. Willimon said, “For the most powerful, militarized nation in the world also to think of itself as an innocent victim is [very dangerous] deadly. . . American Christians may one day look back upon our response to 9/11 and see it as our greatest Christological defeat.”

Willimon goes on, “Sept. 11, 2001 has changed me. I’m going to preach as never before about Christ crucified as the answer to the question of what’s wrong with the world. I have resolved to relentlessly reiterate from the pulpit that the worst day in history was not a Tuesday in New York, but a Friday in Jerusalem when a consortium of clergy and politicians and those in authority colluded to run the world on their own terms by crucifying God’s own Son.

I would add, that the worlds’ greatest defeat was also it’s greatest victory because God chose to take matters into His own terms:

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners Christ died for us.

Romans 5:6-8 (NIV)

You see, it's God's victory through His Son, Jesus Christ, who overcomes all the defeats we experience in this life, during this present time, including the events of 9/11. Even the defeat of death:

"Where, O death is your victory? Where, O death is your sting? The sting of death is sin and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through Our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore my dear brothers [and sisters], stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know your labor will not be in vain.

1 Corinthians 15:55-58 (NIV)

Christian songwriter and worship leader Matt Redman wrote the song, "Blessed Be Your Name," shortly after the events of 9/11. Redman says that "Sept. 11 taught him that when it comes to worshipping God, we must trust, of course. But we can also be real, raw, and honest. We can lay our frustration and confusion before God and still rejoice. Doing so tells God we know he is bigger than all of our issues - and also provides a window of hope to a watching world"