



## Romans 13.8-14

In today's passage Paul has more to say about the central importance of love and he uses two slightly surprising images to help his readers understand.

### Debt

- Paul starts talking about debt in the context of saying Christians should be model citizens and should meet all their commitments and obligations, including the payment of taxes. They should not leave any debt outstanding.
- Perhaps he has in mind the effect that being in debt can have on you. How it can fill you with anxiety, even fear. How it can dominate your thoughts so much that you can hardly think of anything else. How it can restrict what you are capable of doing, the ways you spend your time.
- We've probably all had some experience of the struggle of being in debt at some time in our past. Many are in it now of course. I used to be a bank manager and used to see daily the effect debt had on people's lives, whether they had been forced into that situation or arrived there through their own foolishness.
- I agree with Paul that being in debt is something to avoid - especially if you want to enjoy and keep control of your life. But then he thinks of a different kind of debt, which Christians are never free of: the debt to love others.
- It's an interesting thought. If I ask you to think about who you owe a debt of love to you might think of parents, other family members, teachers and others who have shown you love and helped you over the years in practical ways or even in your faith journey.
- But remembering what we talked about last week we know that Christians are also to love enemies, persecutors, ungrateful people. How can we have a debt to love these people? Not because of what they have done for us but what Jesus has done for us ... we can't repay Jesus but we must "repay Jesus" - by loving others, not just going through the motions but with a deep, true love which always seeks the other person's good, whatever their attitude or actions towards us.

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- Paul tells us that we all have a debt, an obligation that will never be fully paid off, to love others, all others, even the most unlovely, even those who hate us. And just like owing money can dominate our thoughts and control our behaviour in a negative way (avoiding the bank, worrying, having nightmares, envying others), Paul wants this commitment to love others to dominate our thoughts and control our actions in a *positive* way like giving up our time to work with a charity.
- Having turned the negative idea of being in debt into a positive motivation to show love, Paul goes on to show how the "thou shalt nots" of the ten commandments are summed up in the positive command to love your neighbour as yourself. He says exactly the same thing as Jesus does. Love is the fulfilment of the Law, it makes sense of our covenant relationship with God. Not that we do loving things in order to win God's favour, but that we respond to God's unconditional love for us by showing unconditional love to others.

### Visible or Invisible Christians?

- We all need to have a serious look at ourselves and work out how we can fulfil our obligation to love others - how we can allow this motivation to become dominant in the way we live our lives. Paul urges Christians to wake up from their slumber and actively put their faith into practice - we need to hear that call and catch some of that urgency.
- But the second half of the bible reading also raises questions for me about how "visible" we should be in this loving activity. On the one hand it is right that we should be happy to do our good deeds quietly and anonymously, without needing recognition or applause for our efforts. But Paul also talks about the need for Christians to "clothe themselves with Jesus and to behave decently" and clothing and behaviour are things which are seen by other people (*clothing is used metaphorically here*).
- There are two aspects to this. First, there is a danger in being secretive and anonymous about our faith. Not only does this deny other people a chance to recognise how God is at work in the world, it also opens us to the temptation of living a double life, attending church on a Sunday morning but just blending in with the morals and norms of society the rest of the time.



- Paul's warning (v13) shows that even christians can slip back and behave badly. He warns against drunkenness and sexual immorality - we may be surprised these warnings even need to be given - but also about divisive behaviour and jealousy, which can certainly be seen in most churches as in any other human organisations (*for example...*)
- So one point is that we may feel more secure about behaving badly if we have not "come out" as a christian. I am probably less likely to react with road rage if my car carries a badge indicating I am a christian! If I am an incognito christian I can more easily kid myself and live a subchristian life.
- But there can also be positive aspects to being more open and upfront about our faith to others. Paul writes that we are to act as people of the daytime, as Kingdom of God people, even though the dawn - the time when everybody will see the light - is not quite here yet.
- If we are open and upfront about being a christian this may give people hope and a sign that wrongs can be put right. For example, if I were to get mugged and have my wallet stolen I would look around for somebody in a police uniform to help me. If I see one, that gives me hope that my attacker may be brought to justice and my wallet returned.
- This is why society takes very seriously the crime of impersonating a police officer, as Anders Breivik notoriously did recently in Norway. Who we are on the outside has to be a true reflection of who we are on the inside. (*It also occurs to me; I wonder if impersonating a christian is also a "crime"?*)
- But we live in a time of crisis and in a society which is struggling to keep believing in the materialist dream. It is as if our society has been mugged and is looking around for someone in a uniform which says "I can sort things out". The world, with all its problems does not need proud, superior christians saying "I told you so." But neither does it need anonymous, disguised christians saying "Nothing to do with me mate".
- The world does need open, hands-on, confident followers of Jesus who are overflowing with love, channels of healing, hope and good news. The world needs christians who know why the gospel is good news for the world and how to apply it. This is what we are trying to build here.



## Objections and Conclusions

- So my challenge to all of us today is to do something more openly christian.
- One objection to this might be the negative images and memories the words church and christian and the very idea of church carry for so many people, especially in this part of the world. We need to find ways of addressing that and changing the public perception of the church and christians...
- Its easy for me to talk about being openly christian - I'm a vicar! Its easy for people to see who I am and what I stand for (when I'm in uniform). For many of you it may be much harder to talk about your beliefs at work or socially.
- Maybe in your conversations with people outside the church it might be easier to talk about some of the reasons we meet and things we do, rather than call it church. "I teach a Sunday School class." "I'm part of a group which serves homeless people one night each week". "I'm supporting friends of mine who are trying to do something about the problem of slavery through prostitution in this region."
- I'm not saying we should turn the church into nothing more than a social work organisation, I'm saying perhaps we should be more open about the positive impact the gospel can have in the world.
- This is a real challenge for all of us and one way to make it easier on yourself is to have a support group, a place where people can pray for you, share your worries and help you get to know Jesus and the Bible better. Yes, this is where home groups come in. Please think seriously if you can afford not to be in a home group.
- If we challenge and support each other in these ways, the new people Jesus has made us on the inside should be more visible on the outside. So when people see us they see Jesus, when they hear us speak, encounter us in a conflict or whatever, and they get a christlike response and in this way they experience the love of God.