

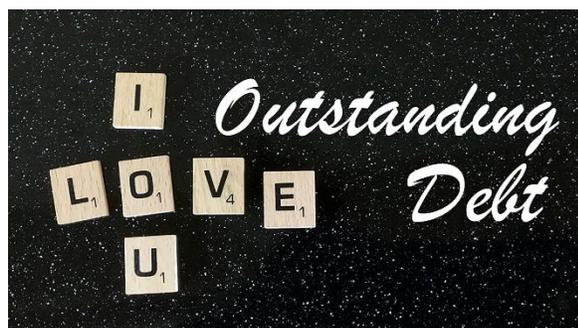
Copyright September 6, 2020. Geist Christian Church. All Rights Reserved.

Title: Outstanding Debt

Preaching: Ryan Hazen, Senior Associate Minister

Text: [Romans 13:8-14](#)

E-mail: [Ryan Hazen](#)



When Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa was a young boy, he had a life-changing experience because of a display of God's love flowing through another person. In South Africa, at that time, if a black person and a white person met while walking on a path, the black person was expected to get off the path and allow the white person

to pass by. And, as they were passing by, the black person was supposed to nod their head as a gesture of respect. One day, Tutu and his mother were walking down the street when they noticed a tall white man, dressed in a black suit, walking toward them. Before he and his mother could step off the sidewalk, this man stepped off and allowed Tutu and his mother to pass by. As they passed by, the man tipped his hat in a gesture of respect to Tutu's mother. Tutu was shocked and asked his mother, "Why did the white man do that?" His mother explained that the white man was an Anglican Priest. She explained that he was a man of God, and that's why he did what he had done.

Tutu would later say: "I decided then and there that I wanted to be an Anglican Priest too. And what is more, I wanted to be a man of God."¹ A simple act by a follower of Christ had a profound impact on young Desmond who would go from that moment to become a voice in the fight against apartheid and a Nobel Peace Prize recipient. Love is powerful. Love is formational. Love is transformational.

Paul knew this when he wrote his letter to the Romans. Paul unfolds his gospel of grace in the first eleven chapters of Romans. In light of such grace, he begins the twelfth chapter by calling on his audience to offer their bodies "as a living sacrifice." "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." (Romans 12:1) The rest of the twelfth and thirteenth chapters begin to show the practical outworking of how one can do that – what does it mean to offer our bodies in sacrificial living? Paul suggests that it means thinking and acting in a way so as not to please oneself but to please others, and it means making one's love for

others genuine. In other words, offering our bodies as a living sacrifice is not something that we can do alone, but must be accomplished in and through community.

Just before the passage for today, Paul addresses the Christian community's relationship with governing authorities. Paul has been instructing the Christians in Rome to pay taxes and to have no debts not only because of the possibility of punishment if they don't pay but as a matter of conscience - because it is the right thing to do. But then, he says something very radical. He says that if there is anything that followers of Jesus Christ owe to another person, it must be nothing other than love.

And this love, as the Christian mystics put it, "has two feet: love of God and love of neighbor."² One can't go without the other because the love of God is inseparable from the love of neighbor. In our neighbor, we should see God. Mister Rogers, an ordained Presbyterian minister, sang it daily - he wasn't wanting us to come live next to him, he was wanting to see God in us and for us to see God in others - won't you please, won't you please, please won't you be my neighbor.

Today's passage - chapter 13, verse 8 - begins with the word "owe" and it allows Paul to shift from addressing those obligations to the governing authorities like paying taxes and being a citizen in society to addressing obligations to one's neighbor. "Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves one another has fulfilled the law." (Romans 13:8) His audience is to have no outstanding debts except to love one another.

Being in debt is something we've been warned against. We teach our kids that debt is bad and it's one of the central tenants that Dave Ramsey teaches in his Financial Peace University that we've offered several times. A measure of our self-respect comes from living according to the twin principles, "owe nothing to anyone," and "no one owes me anything." The catchy line "don't believe the world owes you a living," are words that we believe.

Pop culture even replicates the idea. A scene in the movie *Rocky III* shows an argument between Rocky Balboa and Paulie, his friend, and brother-in-law, in which Rocky says, "Come on, you act like everybody owes you a livin' ... Nobody owes nobody nothin'. You owe yourself."³ But the apostle Paul espouses a different idea for the Christian community. He calls believers to live according to the principle that there is always one obligation that can never be settled: the debt of love. Contrary to financial advice, we should

ALWAYS be in debt to another person - trying to repay them daily a debt of love.

Paul knew that people had trouble trying to figure out how to closely follow the Mosaic law. He lists four of the Ten Commandments: do not commit adultery, do not murder, do not steal, do not covet. It may seem that he contradicts what he went to great lengths to establish earlier in the letter, that through Christ, believers have died to the law to live anew in the Spirit. What has happened, however, is that believers have died to the law so that the law may be fulfilled in them.

God sent Jesus to break the relentless hold of sin and death over us, "so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit." (Romans 8:4). For those who are in Christ and living by the Spirit, Paul can now say that "You shall not covet," along with the other community-oriented commands lists can be summed up in a law of love. It is a simplification of remembering all of the parts and pieces of the Mosaic law – do this and you'll be fine – you've fulfilled the law if you do this one thing well.

It's not original with Paul – it's original with Jesus. In the 22nd chapter of Matthew you'll find these words of Jesus, "And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." (Matthew 22:39-40)

In 13:11-14, Paul shifts the vision of his audience to see the command to love one's neighbor in light of the future day of salvation. He writes of the salvation approaching "us," highlighting its community orientation. The appeal to awaken from sleep and lay aside the deeds of darkness evokes the appeal not to be conformed to "this world, this age."

The debt of love can never be settled because we grow up into the salvation that is ours in Christ by loving our neighbor through the work of the Spirit. The working out of our salvation is a community undertaking, making it impossible for us to live as free agents.

I've been thinking this week about how every person we meet has a story and rarely do we know the depth and breadth of that story. I specifically thought about this as I read about the death of Chadwick Boseman. He is the actor who passed away last week from colon cancer at the age of 43. Get your colonoscopy. He got his acting start in *Third Watch* and *All My Children* but quickly soared to starring roles in movies like *42* about Jackie Robinson, *Marshall* about Thurgood Marshall, and is best known for his lead in *Black Panther*.

What nearly no one knew is that he was diagnosed with colon cancer four years ago. Marshall, Da5Bloods, and other works were all filmed between countless surgeries and chemotherapy. Two years after his diagnosis, again known to no one but family, he gave an interview on Sirius XM. In the video, Boseman described his friendship with two young boys named Ian and Taylor, who were fighting cancer themselves and holding on to life for the release of Black Panther.

Boseman begins to cry when he recounts the boys' death before the movie. Finally, full of emotion, he was able to get out the words, "yeah, it means a lot."^{4 4} It meant a lot for Boseman to be loved like that and to love like that. In Black Panther, the secret world of Wakanda is built on the impenetrable strength of Vibranium – a fictional extraterrestrial metal that holds immeasurable energy. It protected Boseman on the screen. If only he had something similar in real life.

Right now, we all need to find our personal Vibranium – to absorb all of this world's craziness. Perhaps we have it. Perhaps we just know it by another name and just don't make use of it as much as we should or could. What if the real name for Vibranium is LOVE?

Love is powerful. Love changes us. Love transforms us and saves us. We don't know the result of the love we allow to flow from God through us to others, but there will be a glorious unfolding of it someday. Paul says: "Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another."

What an amazing way to put it. Our infinite debt to God is so real that Jesus paid the price. And if we accept Jesus' cancellation of our debt and give ourselves to Him, then we can live as people who don't owe anything to anybody except to love one another.

God loves us so much that God took all the stuff we do, all the sins we commit, and nailed it to a cross.

Therefore, we can live debt-free. But, we do have a debt to pay — to love as Christ has loved us. Some of us in this day are pretty hard to love. I try to meditate on the love God has for them. In that light, I can't help but love them. It is my responsibility as a Christian to see others as God sees them.

I think about that Anglican Priest in South Africa who, because of humble love, did not take advantage of others as he could have. What does love look like as we seek to be in community with one another? It looks like Jesus. He got to know those on the margins. In doing so, He changed their lives. That is what we are to seek to do and be as well. The word Christian means "little Christ." May it be so.

¹ Desmond Tutu story from his bio page at www.biography.com.

² Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 4: Season after Pentecost 2, page 38.

³ Clip from Rocky III found at www.youtube.com/watch?v=R84HDbsHp8Y

⁴ Clip found at www.insider.com – August 29, 2020 – “An emotional clip of Chadwick Boseman discussing two young 'Black Panther' fans with terminal cancer is being seen in a new light”