

Romans 13:8-10 A right attitude to the Law

Introduction

Towards the end of 2012 the national debt of the UK stood at over 1.387 trillion pounds in an economy that year valued at 1.54 trillion in total; that is the debt was equivalent to approximately 90% of the total economic output. In December 2014 the average UK household owed £54,915 –including mortgage payments. Collectively we (as a UK population) paid in excess of 55 billion pounds in interest repayments on our debts; a figure that works out at £1,096 per person in 2014 (various internet sources reported these figures). In financial terms we are an indebted nation. Yet this is how our society is structured based on repayment of credit loaned to us that is paid off over an agreed period of time. If our income and outgoings remain stable then there is no problem. When they don't there can be major problems that agencies like Christians Against Poverty and the Citizens Advice Bureau are contacted to help alleviate what seem like insurmountable problems.

Yet life is more than money and our indebtedness to others is much greater than can be expressed in financial terms. How could anyone repay the investment their parents made in their lives in terms of time and effort, love and care? It is part of the blessing and responsibility of parenthood that we know there are costs involved! However, that same principle is implied in every relationship in which we willingly invest something of ourselves. The rewards of love and friendship cannot be measured in pounds and pence; they are priceless! We praise God for the individuals who have chosen invest in our lives and we in turn do the same with other people. It is rightly assumed that the 'debt' we owe to others for their investments is repaid (hopefully!) in part to them by reciprocal love and affection, but also by seeking to show God's love and affection in very practical ways to other people. I praise God for the people in this church who give of their best efforts to invest in the lives of other people in our communities from the very youngest to the oldest individuals. Paul in this section of Romans chapter thirteen has moved from our relationship with the state to our relationships with people in general. Healthy relationships must be respectful ones. Therefore, the apostle takes time to apply the Christian principles on which we stand to each area of our lives. It begins with an attitude of mind in which our view of the world and other people has been transformed by the Holy Spirit and then is worked out in the real world of opportunities and challenges; of joys and sorrows. In this short section of Romans 13 Paul makes four succinct points to help these new believers live out their faith in the capital city of the Roman Empire.

1. A Christian attitude to finances (Romans 13:8a)

Let no debt remain outstanding...

Some Bible versions have a translation here that is potentially misleading. In the King James Version of Romans 13:8a it states: *Owe no man any thing...* which might imply that the incurring of any debt is forbidden to the Christian. But this is not what Paul or the Bible in general teaches on this subject. The NIV rendering: *Let no debt remain outstanding...* conveys more clearly his meaning. In other words the teaching here is a challenge to ensure we honour our obligations and promises as far as it is humanly possible. On all our bank notes there is a promise from the Bank that issued the notes to honour the sum of money in question. The actual piece of paper may be worth considerably less than the sum printed on the bank note, but the declared sum will be credited to the account of the owner of the note when required. Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount made this statement: *Give to the one who*

asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you (Matthew 5:42). In a similar parallel passage in Luke 6:34, Jesus assumes that borrowing and lending money are part and parcel of everyday life; *and if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, expecting to be repaid in full.* In Psalm 37 David the author indicated that one of the signs of a righteous person's character was their willingness to assist others when they felt it was appropriate. Psalm 37:26: *They are always generous and lend freely; their children will be a blessing.* In the context David was almost certainly speaking in general terms in a subsistence economy where most people bartered things to obtain the necessities of life, rather than the ancient equivalent of a bank loan! However, the principle here is easily applicable in any context. If you borrow something it is always on the understanding that a time will come for the object or the money, if it is a financial transaction, to be returned. It would be out of the question for a Christian honouring God to take out a loan to purchase a home or a car or some other significant transaction without first having some idea of how we can afford to meet the repayments for it. Life situations may arise that we could not have foreseen which can prevent us honouring our obligations, but it must be the last resort when we have committed to a scheme for repayment.

Paul here is stating a principle that goes much deeper than simply keeping up with your mortgage payments for your home; or on your loan for whatever goods you have purchased on credit. It means honouring our promises to other people. This can be for a range of things from formal contractual arrangements in a business relationship to private promises spoken to a friend or family member. It is a call to be a person of integrity. It is saying when you make a commitment to something or someone that you only promise what you can actually deliver. Now all of us at times have to apologise to someone that we could not honour some obligation or other, but it is embarrassing. It should make us both more careful in what we promise and more determined to keep our promises in the future. It has been alarming over the years hearing people openly admitting how they have got away with not paying their dues or settling accounts in business, for example. Sadly there have been examples of people who professed to be Christians who were guilty of this kind of practice. There are lots of things we cannot do, but being people of integrity is manageable for all of us.

2. The Christian's outstanding debt (Romans 13:8b)

... except the continuing debt to love one another...

There are some things that we can do and believe that we have done everything reasonable that can be done. This assessment may be true of a task someone asked us to help with. It may be something like mowing a lawn or wallpapering a room. There are agreed criteria by which we can know that all has been accomplished and the obligation discharged. However, what Paul has in mind is of a completely different character altogether. Could you imagine a parent saying to a child: 'That's it, it may only be Wednesday but I have reached my quota of love for you this week?' or an adult saying similar words to an elderly parent for whom they are a main carer? Or a couple uttering similar sentences on an evening out! The absurdity of it is apparent the moment such words were spoken. A task may be completed but an attitude of Christian love towards another person has no limit. Paul has already touched on what Christian loves looks like in practice in Romans 12:9-13: *Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.*¹⁰ *Be devoted to one another in love. Honour one another above yourselves.*¹¹ *Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord.*¹² *Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.*¹³ *Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practise hospitality.* Paul's description of love in action is of a way of life; of an attitude that sets us apart from many other people around us. he is very clearly not compartmentalising it into a

part of our lives which by implication might suggest it could be absent elsewhere. The most familiar passage on this subject is found in I Corinthians. In that letter to one of the most dysfunctional churches of the First Century AD, in a context of explaining how Christians should worship God in their collective gatherings for worship and fellowship we find these valuable and insightful words. *If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.* ²*If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.* ³*If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.* ⁴*Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.* ⁵*It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.* ⁶*Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.* ⁷*It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.* ⁸***Love never fails*** (I Corinthians 13:1-8a). What Paul is describing here can be put into practice by anyone. If he had been talking here about gifting then that would be very different because God has gifted us in different ways. In this room today there are many different gifts utilised in workplaces or other settings. We praise God for our gifting but equally also for those with which other people are blessed as well. However, God's people equally have a calling to love others based on the example God has given us in *Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.* ⁸*Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.* ⁹*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.* ¹⁰*This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.* ¹¹*Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.* ¹²*No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and His love is made complete in us.* (I John 4:7-12)

In life we will never accomplish a target of liking everyone we meet. Nor will everyone necessarily like you or me. There are some people with whom it will always be a real effort to get on with them and work with them. However, we are called to love each person with a sense of care and respect that would honour our Lord and Saviour.

The challenge we face is this: is there someone I have not shown love to recently? In fact through my attitude or words or actions I have displayed a very different approach to a relationship with them. If so and the Holy Spirit prompts your mind what will you do about it? In some cases it is necessary to take a step back and think how best can I build a healthy functional relationship with this other person or fellow believer? How can I avoid situations of tension or difficulty? Maybe a line has been crossed and apologies are needed to be offered – if this is God's guidance then may He give us the courage to act on such a conviction. It is so important to keep short accounts with God and with one another and where there are difficulties to get them resolved at the earliest opportunity.

3. The implications of honouring this debt (Romans 13:8c)

... for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law. The extent of this obligation to show God's love to other people was a cause of debate amongst Jewish leaders in the time of Jesus. They held long and complicated discussions as to whom one had a responsibility to act as a neighbour when they were in need. It is no surprise that Jesus was invited to contribute to this debate ²⁵*On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher,' he asked, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?'* ²⁶*'What is written in the Law?'* he replied. *'How do you read it?'* ²⁷*He answered, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind"; and, "Love your neighbour as yourself."* ²⁸*'You have answered correctly,' Jesus replied. 'Do this and you will live.'* ²⁹*But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbour?'* (Luke 10:25-29). It was not an abstract debate for people

with time on their hands, rather it was raised by sincere Jewish believers who wished to honour God and fulfil their obligations to other people. Obviously the people whose doors were nearest one's own might be within the boundaries, but how far ought one to go down the street? There is of course no strict scientific answer to this 'problem' - if that is the best way to state it. But instead Jesus goes on to suggest another way of looking at this subject. The method He chose was a familiar one at that time, telling a story and allowing His hearers to participate in judgement on the responses of the actors in question. The story Jesus told is found in Luke 10:30-35. *A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half-dead.*³¹ *A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side.*³² *So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.*³³ *But a Samaritan, as he travelled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him.*³⁴ *He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him.*³⁵ *The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. "Look after him," he said, "and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have."* Those of us who are regularly in church and have a Christian background know exactly what Jesus intends to communicate through this story. He has modelled what He teaches here on the visit to Samaria in the visit highlighted in John chapter four. In that passage the author, John, reminds us that Jews and Samaritans had no dealings with one another. They both were happy to live separate lives in adjacent territories. Although from time to time each had to use the public highways to bypass or travel through the other communities territory there was minimal contact on such occasions. The idea that someone from one background would put themselves out to assist a person from the other would have been deemed ludicrous to the vast majority of Jews and Samaritans in Jesus' day. Yet this was the example Jesus chose and did so deliberately to seek to extend the horizons of His Jewish hearers.

The question comes to you and me today? Who is your neighbour? This may be a question to take away and pray about. Who might God be putting across your pathway in the coming weeks? A more challenging question might be this: Is there someone to whom God might be prompting you to be the neighbour at the present time? In Jesus' story none of the actors expected to be placed in the position they were with the range of choices suddenly presented to the three men who passed by the victim of that violent assault. In this case the least likely person stepped forward, but recognising that he could only be at best part of the solution took a risk of inviting other better qualified people to assist in aiding this man. In this case he took him to a nearby innkeeper who may in real life have had to seek medical advice to assist the injured man. Thus the Samaritan did what he could but invited another person or people to play their part also. Who is my neighbour today? Jesus completed His story and invited his questioner to interpret it in the light of his own question.³⁶ *'Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?'*³⁷ *The expert in the law replied, 'The one who had mercy on him.'* Jesus told him, *'Go and do likewise'* (Luke 10:36-37). The man had hoped Jesus might give him a neat and tidy answer with which he might agree or disagree but this was not the case. Instead he was invited to lift his horizons and see new opportunities to be a neighbour in a context of someone else's felt need.

This point links in very well to our mission strategy as a church whereby through our community ministries we act as good neighbours to others in our community to provide a service that is a felt need. Our Parent and Toddlers Ministry, Boogie Babies and Craft Club amongst families with young children draw significant numbers of people on this basis. Likewise the witness of the Breakthrou young people and the Step Out Team last summer in painting the fencing at the racetrack near Broughty Ferry castle enabled links to be made with other groups and council employees; most recently Gary offering his skills in teaching the sex

and relationships course at Grove Academy to an S3 class as a pilot project was a response to a felt need in our local high school. The fact that he was invited not only to teach the same materials in the other S3 classes, but also to work with other year groups is hopefully an opportunity that might be taken up in the future. Our acts of neighbourliness are not primarily doing for others what we would like to do for them, rather they are us doing for others the things they need or desire someone else to do for them. When we as Christians can use our initiative to offer a needed service, it will in God's time inevitably provide opportunities to share our faith because we will have earned the right to use words to express our neighbourliness –in Jesus' name.

4. **The social implications of Christian love** (Romans 13:9-10)

Why does Paul highlight the love of others here rather than speaking in this context of love for God? I John 4:19-21 gives a good explanation. *We love because He first loved us.*²⁰ ***Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen.***²¹ *And He has given us this command: anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.* Neighbourliness in the Christian sense here is visible. It is demonstrable. Other people can make judgements about the words we use of and to another person. Does a person leave your presence and mine blessed because our words have been gracious and affirming and where appropriate healing ones? Or do they leave our company feeling emotionally wounded and sad because they were ill-chosen and unhelpful? This does not mean we will always agree with each others' opinions or actions, nor that there are not times when legitimate challenges and constructively critical comments may need to be stated. However, what is important is how we communicate to the other person. If we need to make a critical comment do it in the context of affirming the individual for something positive they have said or done so that we are communicating loud and clear that our concerns are not an attack on their person, rather a genuine love for them to help them be more the woman or man God desires them to be. Practical Christ-like love and compassion for other people is costly in terms of the emotional and relational investment it may require us to invest in another person's life. And like some financial investments it may take a very long time before there is anything to show for it!

Paul will cite commandments that cover our relationships with other people, like Jesus did with the Rich Young Ruler in Mark 10:17-23.⁹ *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 neighbour as yourself.'*¹⁰ *Love does no harm to a neighbour. Therefore love is the fulfilment of the law.*

(a) **You shall not commit adultery** It is wrong because it is a sin against God and the spouse of the individual concerned. Joseph got this point very clearly when enticed by Potiphar's wife in Genesis 39:6b-10: *Now Joseph was well-built and handsome,⁷ and after a while his master's wife took notice of Joseph and said, 'Come to bed with me!'*⁸ *But he refused. 'With me in charge,' he told her, 'my master does not concern himself with anything in the house; everything he owns he has entrusted to my care.⁹ No one is greater in this house than I am. My master has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?'*¹⁰ *And though she spoke to Joseph day after day, he refused to go to bed with her or even to be with her.* Joseph was demonstrating genuine love for this woman by declining her request. This is so contrary to the ethics and values of those in our society who argue that if consenting adults wish to do something then it must be okay. The man or woman who wishes to follow God will endeavour as far as possible to make choices in their lives that honour both God and this Commandment, but also seek to honour the other person and anyone else that might be affected by our behavioural choices. In an increasingly secular society we will be mocked and ridiculed for our allegedly narrow and sheltered opinions.

(b) **You shall not murder** If sexual immorality is wrong because it violates the law of love, then the taking of innocent life by a calculated act of murder is especially heinous. The debate on the radio on the day I was finishing this sermon on the life of ‘Jihadi John’, the Kuwaiti-born man who had spent some years of his life in London, illustrated this truth so graphically. Presumably he intends to show his love for Allah by the barbaric executions of aid-workers business people, prisoners of war and whoever else crosses his pathway in IS controlled Syria. Yet it must be a contradiction in terms as almost any rational being can grasp. Love for God and love for people must include respect for the life of another person regardless of their age. This was why God took so seriously King David’s adultery with Bathsheba and the subsequent murder of her husband to cover up his crime (II Samuel 11-12). The price he paid in his future family life was so costly because the law of love had been violated and the honour of God impugned by his choices. Murder is not just of a person’s life it can be the assassination of their character and reputation. You can destroy someone’s life and future by words or actions which make them feel as if it might be better to be dead.

(c) **You shall not steal** There are so many ways we can do this stealing time or materials from an employer; we can mislead potential customers by overstating the worth of a product or service. The serious problem of shop-lifting which adds a significant premium to the price of many goods in the shops to cover these losses affects everyone. There are no victimless crimes. The whole insurance scam industry works on the basis that there are no victims only payouts –but such people never seem to get it that their claims push up the premiums for everyone else! In academic life a person’s scientific discovery or their intellectual property can be passed off as the work of another person. The increasing use of anti-plagiarism software in the university world is a reminder that the temptation to steal has never been stronger when essays and even theses can be purchased for a modest payment! The follower of Jesus because of their love for God and love for other people will respect another person known or unknown enough not to steal anything that is rightfully theirs.

(d) **You shall not covet** This is the commandment particularly for the Western world and the advertising industry whose job it is to make us desire things we never even know we didn’t need. The fact that we are besieged by advertising in a multitude of forms is a reminder that it must pay or it would not be done. The classic example of a person undone by this sin is the Israelite national Achan who violated the ban on taking material goods from Jericho in the time of Joshua (Joshua 7); it was a corrosion of his character that ended up destroying not only his usefulness in service but ended his life.

How might we model a right attitude to God’s law of love?

(i) **Make time to listen to other people** It is an increasingly lost art as we rush to solve their problems; when the other person may actually be more interested in the investment of our time as a good listener. Who might benefit from your listening ear? [Mary Luke 10:39]

(ii) **Be willing to share yourself with other people** Too often charities and churches can solicit cash donations in reasonable quantities, but love requires the costly investment of ourselves in the lives of other people. Is there someone you might help in this way?

(iii) **Forgive other people and be willing to be forgiven** Keeping holding on to the failures of others and not allowing people to move on damages so many relationships. Cycles of negative behaviour must be broken. Do you need to break a negative cycle of behaviour today? [Matthew 18:21-22 Peter how often should I forgive my brother?]

(iv) **Serving others in Jesus name** Jesus’ example in John 13 of washing the disciples’ feet is our calling. Rarely literally. Jesus said: *‘A new command I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.’*³⁵ *By this everyone will know that you are My disciples, if you love one another’* (John 13:34-35). May He help us to live this way, for Jesus’ sake, Amen.