

The Debt of Love

Owe no one anything, except to love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. ⁹ The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; you shall not murder; you shall not steal; you shall not covet,” and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” ¹⁰ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

The letter of the Romans is the letter we have in our Scripture where the apostle Paul most extensively lays out his theology. Precisely because much of the New Testament (and all of Paul’s writings) are letters, we don’t have a systematic account of what the early Christians actually believed. Letters, by nature, are meant to address specific occasions rather than laying out a well-organized treatise. Romans is the closest thing we have to an exception.

Paul did not found the church in Rome but he needed them. He was hoping to take a missionary trip to Spain, to start churches there, but he needed a base of support to do that. He was hoping the Roman church would be that base. He needed to convince the Romans to fund his next missionary trip. One way to think of the letter to the Romans is sort of like a grant application. Paul is laying out his interpretation of the gospel that he hopes to preach in Spain with the support of the Roman church.

And in doing that, Paul makes three really bold claims. First, Paul was the first Christian we know of to claim that Gentiles (non-Jewish people) did not have to accept Jewish cultural norms and practices in order to be Christian. This was profoundly radical. Paul was claiming that we can all be a part of the same faith community without all becoming the same – that diversity is a gift from God.

The second bold claim Paul makes is that this inclusiveness is the continuation of God’s covenant with the Jewish people. Rather than being anti-Jewish, Paul argues that his theology, the theology that claims full inclusion of people not like the Jews, is not contrary to God’s covenant with Israel but rather the fulfillment of it as God promised Abraham and Sarah that they would be a blessing to the whole world.

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This is especially important as there was a strong anti-Jewish sentiment in Rome at the time and in the late 40s, Jews were expelled from the city of Rome. Paul wants to make it clear that you can be pro Jewish and pro Gentile inclusion at the same time. You can be proud of your own culture, your own traditions and accepting of others at the same time.

But perhaps the most radical claim of all that Paul is making in the letter to the Romans is centered around the overarching theme of the letter – the justice of God. This is especially important consider that Rome considered itself the center of and the arbitrator of justice for the

world. Scholar NT Wright says: “Rome prided itself on being, as it were, the capital of justice, the source from which justice would flow throughout the world...Paul’s declaration that the gospel of King Jesus reveals God’s justice must also be read as a deliberate challenge to imperial pretension.”

In other words, Paul is claiming to the church in Rome, the very center of power, that there is a higher power than that of Rome, that there is a more just justice than that of Rome, and that there is a more important allegiance than loyalty to Rome. And the primary difference between the reign of God that Paul proclaims and the reign of Rome has everything to do with what those two kingdoms are based upon and what guiding principles direct their respective citizens.

The Roman Empire and its authority, for all of its claims of intellectual and philosophical superiority, was, based on force. Rome had the most powerful army in the world. The peace of Rome was based on the threat of being destroyed if you rebelled. The justice of Rome was based on the government bringing down the sword on those who broke the law – like Jesus when he was crucified. The allegiance to Rome, apart from the elites, was based on fear of what Rome would do to you if you weren’t loyal.

But for the kingdom of God, everything is based on love and on how far God was willing to go to establish a kingdom based on love. In Romans, Paul says,

“But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.”

And this:

“Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will affliction or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword? No, in all these things we are more than victorious through him who loved us.”

And then in our passage today: “Owe no one anything, except to love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.”

For Paul, love is the foundation of the gospel. God’s work through the covenant with the Jewish people all the way through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is an outpouring of God’s love for us. And the only proper response we humans can have when gifted such an extravagant love is to order our lives out of that same reality – to love God, to love one another, to even love our enemies. This kind of love for Paul is what we owe God and what we owe each other.

Again, he is establishing a contrast with what the Roman empire demands. Earlier in this chapter, Paul tries to point out that just because he’s greatest allegiance is to Christ and not to Rome, he is not against given Rome what they demand of him (so long as it doesn’t go against what he believes God asks of him). Listen to what he says:

“Pay to all what is due them: taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due.”

This is what the empire demands – your money, your respect, your loyalty. It's like Paul is saying, "That's all well and good," but in the church, in the kingdom of God, we operate out of a little different reality. The only thing we truly owe each other is the very thing God has given to us – love. Love is our guiding reality. Love is what differentiates us from the Empire. Love is the fulfillment of all that God asks of us. This is Paul's message to the Romans.

So here we are...living 2000 years, 2000 years, after Paul penned these words in a different time, a different place, a different culture. What does this mean for us today?

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First, I think Paul still has something important to say to us about how we understand human authority (governments, empires, and so forth) in light of what God has done through Jesus. On one hand, we live in a very different situation. We live in a democracy where each of us has a say in what kind of government we will have. Paul, and most of his audience, lived under the power of Empire. Whereas some had more political power than others, Caesar was all powerful and there was little anyone could do about that. Paul wants his readers to understand that the power of Rome – that seems absolute – is in fact not. "Sure," he says, "go ahead and give the Empire it's due – taxes, respect, honor, but remember that our greater allegiance is to God."

I worry some that we are living in a never ending cycle where we move from one election to the next, one campaign to the next, with each campaign asking us to believe the worst in those who think differently than us. Perhaps one invitation Paul's letter offers us is to simply take a breath, to trust that while elections are very important, that God has been and will be at work in the world no matter what kind of government there is or who is in charge. Don't get me wrong, we should be politically engaged. We should advocated for our candidates and our issues. We certainly should vote. But we should also remember that the "justice of God," is where we find our ultimate hope.

Secondly, Paul still has something to teach us about the centrality of love. Love was an important concept both in ancient Judaism and in Greco-Roman philosophy but it didn't have the same centrality as it did in Jesus' teachings and in Paul's writings. The empire demanded absolute loyalty – that was it's most important value. Paul claims that the one thing we owe one another is love. Echoing Jesus, Paul says that love fulfills all of God's law, all of the 10 commandments, all that God asks of us. Love is what matters most.

Whereas love was not central in the surrounding culture in Paul's day, I wonder if love has become so cliché in our day that it's lost some of its meaning. We can say, "I love..." about any number of things. For example, "I absolutely love cinnamon rolls." But the kind of love that Paul was talking about was a Greek word, *agape*, and it means unconditional love. In another of his letters Paul defines the characteristics of love.

He writes, "Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant⁵ or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable; it keeps no record of wrongs;"

We live in a time when we use the word love for almost anything, but when Paul says we owe love to one another, he's talking about specific, tangible acts that come with love. We owe one another patience. We owe one another kindness. We owe one another that we'll be happy for others when they succeed and not arrogant when we do. We owe one another respect. We owe one another a willingness to not always get our own way. We owe one another forgiveness."

Finally, at the end of this section of our Scripture, Paul says, "Love does no wrong to a neighbor." To live out of a reality of love means that we live in such a way that we don't harm others, so much as it's in our power to do so.

It sounds simple, right, that the ultimate reality we are called to live by is not the reality of power, not the reality of uplifting our side and demonizing the other, not the reality of win at all costs, but rather the reality of love. It sounds simple, but for Paul, in the letter to the Romans where he lays out his most comprehensive understanding of who God is and what God has done through Jesus, love really is everything. It is the heart of the gospel he preaches and it is the very power of God. Amen.