

What Do We Owe One Another?

Romans 13:8-14

Sermon preached at St. Mark's virtual worship by Zac Koons on September 6, 2020

By almost every measure America is a country in crisis. Our economy is plummeting. From the top levels of government through down to levels of individual behavior and every one in between, we have on the whole proven unable to take the appropriate steps to keep this coronavirus under control—something many countries around the world have managed to accomplish with far greater effectiveness. Our reputation on the global stage is in severe decline. And our national political dialogue has devolved into shouting matches largely devoid of meaningful content. Combine this with the low-burn depression animating the conscience of almost everyone I know in these lockdown days can leave us understandably feeling not exactly proud to be an Americans right now, much less with any clue on even what the first step might be towards fixing something that feels so deeply broken.

I want to talk about this crisis in our country for a few minutes and the role I think we as Christians and we as the Church are called to play within it, because this is what St. Paul is talking about in chapter thirteen in his letter to the Romans. He is giving advice to Christians who are trying to make sense of life in the upside-down feeling Roman Empire.

I need to back up to begin, both in America's history and in Paul's letter to the Romans, but I promise this sermon will be short. One verse before where our reading for today starts, Pauls says this: "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. Owe no one anything."

If we stop right there with that line, "owe no one anything," I think we have something that could actually serve as a pretty good summary of the framework for the original quote unquote American dream; that is, of the foundational philosophy of our liberal democracy, which we often sum up with one word: freedom. By freedom, we say, the founders meant that this is a place where you have things like freedom of speech and freedom of religion, etc., so that you are free to pursue whatever it is you want to pursue—(with, of course, the important caveat that "you" in this case did not apply to women or people who society identified as non-white).

The American dream is that you are free to pursue whatever dream you like; the only rule is that when doing so you cannot limit the freedom of others to do the same. This is where laws come in. Laws in America are put in place not so much to articulate or prescribe one particular version of truth or goodness over others, but are primarily about establishing fairness; about maintaining a neutral playing ground for American dreamers. (This is why public conversations about moral issues are forced to use the language of "rights" instead of "goods.") Laws are the rules we consent to abide by in our individual journeys of pursuing our own interests. Pay to all what is due them. Owe no one anything. Maintain the neutral arena. This is America.

A more close to home example reveals the degree to which this philosophy has been baked into our bones: Consider thank-you notes. Why do we write them? We feel genuine gratitude, sure, but inevitably mixed in

there, at least some times, is an anxiety to restore the neutral state of not feeling beholden to anyone. Think of the apprehension you feel when you genuinely can't remember who paid for the beers last time? Or someone hosts you in their home for a nice dinner and then you feel the pressure to say "well we can't wait to host next time" before you leave. Owing no one anything feels like a virtue in our society.

But of course "owe no one anything" is not the end of Paul's sentence. Paul says, "Owe no one anything, except to love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law." Or as another translation puts it: "Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another."

Paul saying to owe no one anything except love is like saying I am a vegan except for I eat meat. The qualifying clause totally undoes the first half of the sentence. What does it mean to owe someone love? What's so helpful about this metaphor of indebtedness is that it reminds us that love is not a matter of passive decision or even active desire. It is a matter of action. You can't pay off a debt by simply *wanting* to be out of debt. You can't call whatever third or fourth party now owns your student loans and say I have decided I no longer owe you—trust me. A debt is something you must pay. Love is something you must do. Love is something we owe to everyone.

So much of the cultural and political conversation in our country right now seems to boil down to a fundamental question about what we owe one another. From healthcare to education to taxes all the way to whether or not we can force people to wear masks in public—deep down many of these are disagreements about what we owe one another.

I know I am wading into nervous territory for our pulpit, but I really hope the point I am trying to make is not revolutionary or controversial. It is this: Even though there are grounds within the American tradition to withdraw into a Darwinian every-person-and-their-dreams-for-themselves approach to our public life, we as Christians do not have the luxury of taking up that stance. Our starting point has to be love our neighbors. We as Christians and we as the Church, when we are determining our politics, how we will vote, how we will act, where we will donate money, how we form our children, how we engage in public debate on social media, our starting point must be love. We owe love to the world. Of course there is room for us to disagree about the particulars. But our disagreements must be within our more widely held assumption that we are all trying to best love our neighbors. Not whether or not we should in the first place. We owe them love.

We owe the world love, of course, because we have first been the recipients of love. What God accomplishes for us in Christ is the giving of such radical, self-sacrificial, abundant love that we could never pay back in 1,000 lifetimes. God owed us nothing, but God in Christ gives us salvation. And the best thing is that God isn't interested in being paid back. God simply invites us to imitate his gift by passing the love we received onto others, even on our small, broken, human-to-human scale. We owe love to one another because we were first given love we never deserved.

Paul goes one step further still. He says, "Love is what the Commandments are all about. When you love, you fulfill the law." This points to an essential difference between laws as Israel and the Church understand them and laws as we understand them in America. As I said, laws in America are primarily about maintaining fairness. They don't make ultimate claims about truth or morality. They maintain the neutrality of the public

space so individuals can make those decisions for themselves. Laws in Scripture do make claims about truth and goodness.

The consequence of this difference is this: Following the laws articulated by Scripture actually form you over time into a more good and truthful person. If the summary of the law is loving God and loving your neighbor, by following those individual laws, over time you yourself become more loving towards God and your neighbor. You yourself become more holy. And if Jesus is himself the fulfillment, the embodiment, of the law, in following them you yourself become more like Jesus. Obeying the commandments of God are not about earning your salvation; they are about shaping your life into one that looks more like Jesus. The same can't be said for following the laws of fairness. They're not designed to make you more virtuous.

The love we owe is not transactional or measurable. We have been given more love than we deserve. And so as Christians and as the Church we do our best to pass that love onto others. What our country and what our world needs right now is not more opinions loudly shouted. What it needs is love. And you—we—can be part of that. Your acts of love don't have to call attention to themselves. It doesn't have to be extraordinary. But just think about even the fleeting interactions you have with strangers these days. What if our fundamental assumption when approaching those interactions was that we owe that person love. Think about the people that are isolated in the houses adjacent to the house that you are isolated in. Our American assumption is that my property is my domain and my responsibilities to others end at those property lines. What if actually we assume that we owe our neighbors something? Think about the way that that transforms not only our society but our own hearts, so that through love we will be preaching the Gospel of Jesus to the world.

Amen.