

## What Do You Owe?

Romans 13:8-10

So, did you rack up any big debts this holiday season? If the ads running during the bowl games were any sort of accurate metric, lots of people bought new cars. Dad used to buy a new car every three years so he could depreciate it for tax purposes, and he liked to shop the end-of-year sales.

Or maybe you racked up some bills buying gifts for your kids and grandkids. Americans spent almost 5% more this Christmas shopping season than they did last year, and we can only wonder how much of this increase will end up on credit cards.

Well, no matter how many or how few dollars you may have borrowed during this holiday season, Paul tells us that there's one debt that all of us owe – a debt of love. He points us to the second part of what has come to be known as the Great Commandment, a commandment found in the Law of Moses and reaffirmed by Jesus Himself: Love your neighbor as yourself.

But Paul turns his lesson on love in a rather puzzling direction, drawing our attention to the last five of the Ten Commandments: you shall not kill, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not bear false witness against your neighbor, you shall not covet anything that belongs to your neighbor.

Now, these commandments are easy enough to understand. Not that they're particularly easy to keep, though. Remember how, during His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus internalized these seemingly outward prohibitions, reminding us that if we are not supposed to kill we are also not supposed to hate, that lusting after someone is just as serious as having an affair with her.

But what does this list of prohibitions have to do with the love that Paul says we owe to our neighbors? After all, just because I'm not mad enough at someone to want to kill him doesn't mean I love him. There's a lot of emotional distance between caring and nurturing on the one hand and murder on the other.

Ok, so think about someone you love, really love. Killing that person would be the farthest thing from your mind, right? Of course you wouldn't want to steal his wife or her property. Of course you wouldn't tell lies about him or want to have her possessions. Keeping these commandments are thus symptoms of love, outward and visible signs, examples of love. If we really love other people, we will thus fulfill all these commandments, really all of the law, without even thinking too much about it.

And so, as we prepare to come to the table, we need to examine our hearts along these lines. For after all, here we not only make an outward and physical expression of our faith in, our trust in Christ. We not only celebrate our union with Christ, the amazing truth that the Spirit of Christ lives within all His people, just as surely as this bread and this fruit of the vine enter our bodies.

No, because we all come to the same table and because we all eat and drink in the same way, we also express another truth – that we are connected to one another, to everyone who loves and trusts in the Lord Jesus Christ like we do. Here we thus not only celebrate the spiritual presence of Christ, but the unity of the Church.

Now, we know how important it is for this sacrament accurately to express our love for God, our faith, our trust in Christ. That's why the elders are the ones who serve the people – in order for anyone to join the church, it is the elders who are responsible for making sure that they know the basics of the Christian faith, that they really do know that they are sinners in need of a Savior, and that they really do trust in Christ alone for their salvation. Before anyone comes to the table he or she needs to have an idea of the love that God demonstrates for us on the cross of Christ, and that the shed blood of Christ is the payment, the penalty that all our sins deserve.

Thus, we know that it would be a terrible thing for anyone to take communion, making an outward show of union with Christ by faith while inwardly trusting in their possessions or their respectability or their hard work or anything else for their salvation. That's why in I Corinthians Paul said that we should examine ourselves before coming to the table, to make sure our faith in Christ is genuine. He said, "For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself."

But in today's passage, Paul reminds us that "discerning the body" also includes an understanding of our relationship with other believers, the other members of the Body of Christ. Thus, our self-examination must not be limited to our orthodoxy – we must not only have a proper, loving, vertical relationship with Christ, but also a proper, loving, horizontal relationship with all other believers.

So, how big are our debts, this holiday season? Do we owe more love to God? Do we need to spend more time with Him in prayer and study of His Word? And what about the debt of love we owe to one another? Do we need to set aside some old grudges and truly forgive those who may have hurt us? Do we need to rearrange our priorities, putting the needs of others ahead of our own? Do we need to reach out to our neighbors, whoever they may be, loving them just as much and in the same way that we love ourselves, meeting their needs as best we can, welcoming them into our lives?

Now, the good news is that we are all welcome at this table, no matter how great our debts may be. This table is not just for members of this congregation, or just for Presbyterians for that matter. This is Christ's table, and all who know they are sinners and are truly trusting in Christ as Savior are welcome here. After all, Jesus Himself said, "Come to me, all you who are weary with labor, all who are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest."

But Jesus went on to say that we should take His yoke upon ourselves and learn of Him. In other words, we must not only accept Jesus as our Savior, but own Him as our Lord. We must not only seek His gracious pardon for our sins, but we must repent, we must turn away from sin and seek to walk in His ways.

And the good news is that the spiritual reality to which this meal points will allow us to do all of these things. For if Christ is within us, just as surely as this bread will be, then He can live His life through us, a life not only of complete submission to the will of God, but a life of perfect love for others. If the blood of Christ has truly washed our hearts clean of sin, just as this fruit of the vine goes inside of us, we will be able to live in a way that pleases Him and that blesses others, a life that truly fulfills God's law of love.

So, if you truly and earnestly repent of your sins, and are in love and charity with your neighbors, and intend to lead a new life, following the commandments of God, and walking from now

on in his holy ways; draw near with faith, and take this holy Sacrament to your comfort and strength.  
Let us prepare our hearts to come to the table as we sing all the stanzas of Break Thou the Bread of Life.