

Jesus is Loving

Romans 13:8-14

Introduction

A few weeks ago Karen and I had an "adventure day." For Christmas I had given her a box of adventure cards put together by a group called Reach International Outfitters. The box contains 50 adventures from across the state of Ohio, varying in cost and level of activity. You pick a card, scratch off the covering to reveal what adventure you are going to do that day.

On this particular day we went to Loveland, OH to explore the Loveland Castle. This castle sits on the edge of the Little Miami River on the outskirts of Cincinnati. It was constructed by hand, by Harry Andrews, one rock at a time with rocks he harvested from the Little Miami. Interestingly, the idea for this castle grew out of a Sunday School class he taught for young boys.

- He wanted to teach these boys how to become men of honor and dignity, just like the knights of old.
- He wove the truths of Scripture with stories about how to become men with personal character and integrity.
- He made them all Knights of the Golden Trail and proclaimed himself to be Sir Harry.
- Now, of course, real knights need a castle. And thus, an idea was born.

On our tour of the castle I came across two stone tablets, shaped like the tablets you always picture when you think of the Ten Commandments. And, sure enough, crudely etched into those tablets were those 10 commandments as recorded in Exodus 20 ...

- Thou shalt not murder. Thou shalt not lie. Thou shalt not commit adultery. They were all there.
- Except that there were not 10 commandments, but 11 commandments listed.

The 11th commandment read:

XI. Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. (Jesus added this one.)

Every year this month of September is our Stewardship month. Here at Grace we talk about stewardship in terms of four T's:

How do you use your Time, Talent, Testimony and Treasure?

By the end of this month through a process of prayer and discernment, each of you will have indicated to God the level to which you want to be involved in the ministries of this church and the level of your financial support for the next calendar year.

To help us prayerfully make those commitments, each year our church stewardship team chooses a theme. This year our theme is a sentence:

Stewardship is the re-enactment of Christ's life among Christ's people. (T. A. Kantonen)

If that name sounds familiar to any of you, Dr. Kantonen was a professor of systematic theology at Hamma Divinity School over at Wittenberg for more than 30 years. If I could summarize his quote in words we most commonly use around here, I would say:

The way that I use my time, talent, testimony and treasure is a reflection of who Jesus is to me.

For preaching purposes, I am turning that quotation into a familiar question from a generation ago; namely:

What would Jesus do?

As we answer that question, the challenge then will be for us to do the same thing with our own time, talent, testimony and treasure; that is:

Our rightful stewardship is always discovered as we ask what Jesus would do with if He had our time, talent, testimony and treasure.

As Sir Harry and the Knights of the Golden Trail correctly observed, being stewards of all that we have – and all that we are – is first and foremost a matter loving other people.

- Jesus taught us that in Matthew 22 when the religious leaders of the day attempted to trap Him in a theological dispute by asking Him: "Which is the greatest commandment?"
- His response is repeated in the first three verses of our epistle lesson. Listen one more time to how the Apostle Paul presents the teaching of Jesus:

Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law. 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 neighbor as yourself." Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore, love is the fulfillment of the law. (Romans 13:8-10)

Paul phrases it in terms of a debt that we owe. I will make three observations:

#1: THE DEBT OF LOVE IS NEVER ENDING

Look at verse 8:

Let no debt remain outstanding, except the **continuing debt** to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law. (Romans 13:8)

When you first read this passage, you might think it is a teaching about money. Especially during Stewardship month. In some ways it is. But first and foremost it is an instruction on Christian love.

It is true, that based on this verse, many Christians, including some well-known ones, have decided to remain debt free... people like Hudson Taylor (the godly missionary to China) and Charles Spurgeon (a great preacher in England). Currently, guys like Dave Ramsey will quote this text.

But don't miss the point. Yes, these verses are about debt. But not financial debt. They are about the debt of love. And as one old commentator called it, this is a "debt that is eternally due."

- We might say it like this:

While the goal of our earthly debts is to pay them in full, the debt of love is something that will never be paid off.

It is, according to the text, a CONTINUING DEBT. You and I are eternally caught in a debt of love because of this well-known verse of Scripture:

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)

What a wonderful truth! We don't make much noise in a Lutheran worship service, but this truth should always be an exception to that unwritten rule. Jesus loves me, this I know. Can I get an Amen?

That love is so great you will never be able to repay the debt. But when you understand that love, you are compelled to spread that love around. One way we do that is as you serve Him with your Time, Talent, Testimony and Treasure, for in that you are showing God your gratitude for His love. Psalm 116 puts it like this:

What can I give back to God
for the love he has poured out on me?
I'll lift high the cup of salvation—a toast to God!
I'll pray in the name of God;
I'll complete what I promised God I'd do,
and I'll do it together with his people. (Psalm 116:12-14)

#2: THE DEBT OF LOVE PUTS OTHERS FIRST

Look at verse 10:

Love does no harm to a neighbor. (Romans 13:10)

At the very heart of the teaching of Jesus is always the "neighbor" part. Jesus always looks toward others, leaving us with the question:

And who is my neighbor? (Luke 10:25)

Biblically, the answer is:

My neighbor is anyone I have the opportunity to serve.

It is not framed by geography, nationality or gender. And it is not limited to only my friends who look like me, think like me, shop like me, vote like me. We are called to love them all.

When the Bible talks about "God's love" it is always talking about an action.

- God so loved the world that He sent ...
- Jesus was moved with compassion, so He healed ...
- The Good Samaritan inconvenienced himself ...
- The early church shared their possessions and met the material needs of each other ...

God's love is never simply an emotion. It is all about what we DO with our time, talent, testimony and treasure, never what we FEEL.

#3: THE DEBT OF LOVE IS AN URGENT MATTER

Look at verse 11:

And do this, understanding the present time: The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. (Romans 13:11)

There is a story about an older couple who owned a grandfather clock. One night at midnight it went haywire and chimed fourteen times. The old man jumped out of bed and hollered, "Wake up Grandma! It's later than it has ever been before."

Those of you who have heard me preach for any length of time know that I am always reluctant to make predictions about end of time. I went to college during the heyday of "The Late Great Planet Earth" by Hal Lindsey and have ministered through the days of Tim LaHaye's "Left Behind" series. I sang "I Wish We All Been Ready" around many a church campfire. All of those generations have come and gone.

- But this I do know, and I firmly believe:

It's later than it has ever been before.

I think it was in C. S. Lewis' book "Screwtape Letters" where the story was told about three apprentice devils who were coming to this earth to finish their apprenticeship. They were talking to Satan, the chief of the devils, about their plans to tempt and to ruin men. The first said, "I will tell them that there is no God." Satan said, "That will not delude many, for they know that there is a God."

- The second said, "I will tell men that there is no hell." Satan answered, "You will deceive no one that way; men know even now that there is a hell for sin."
- The third said, "I will tell men that there is no hurry." "Go," said Satan, "and you will ruin men by the thousands."

The most dangerous of all delusions is that there is plenty of time.

Our love for Jesus and the lateness of the hour combine for a powerful motivation about what we need to live faithful lives of stewardship.

- There is a world out there that is a mess! And it starts right outside the front doors of this building.
- There is work to be done, and it takes each of us to do it.

APPLICATION

This is a powerful, life-changing passage of Scripture if you will take it to heart. St. Augustine did. As a young man, his life was characterized by loose living and a search for answers to life's basic questions. He wasn't a very nice guy.

Around the year 386, while he was outside walking in a garden, he heard the voice of a child singing a song from the other side of the hedge. The words of the song were, "Pick it up and read it. Pick it up and read it." He thought at first that the song was related to some kind of children's game, but could not remember ever having heard such a song before. He looked through the hedge, but there was no one there.

It was then that he realized this song might be a command from God to open and read the Scriptures. So he located a Bible, picked it up, opened it and read the first passage he saw. It was this passage of Scripture. Romans 13:8-14

From that moment on he lived a life of faith, becoming one of the greatest theologians in the history of Christianity.

The decisions we make this month – and, for that matter, every day of our lives – need to be framed in light of this passage.

Everything you do with all that you have tells the story of your relationship with Jesus Christ. Always remember that you are and always will be in debt because Jesus loves you.

Amen.