

Third Sunday After Epiphany

Sermon Text: Romans 13:8-10

"Owe no man any thing, but to love one another: for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law. For this, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Thou shalt not covet; and if there be any other commandment, it is briefly comprehended in this saying, namely, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. Love worketh no ill to his neighbour: therefore love is the fulfilling of the law."

Beloved of God, Called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.

The Epiphany Season of the church year commemorates the revelation of the Person and work of the Only Begotten Son of God, Our Savior, Jesus Christ.

It emphasizes the free gift of the forgiveness of sins, life and salvation to mankind brought about by the sinless life and innocent suffering and death of Jesus Christ. He who knew no sin became sin for us. He suffered and died on the cross in our place, so that we who were lost and condemned to an eternity in hell would be reconciled with God through Him.

And our sermon text for today does not depart from this most important truth.

Though these holy inspired and matchless words of St. Paul in our text concerning Christian love were addressed to the Christians in Rome, they are addressed to you and me today as well. For we are, by the Grace of God in Christ, as the early part of Paul's letter declares, the "beloved of God, called to be saints". (Romans 1:7)

Dear Ones, Jesus Christ has been revealed to us through the marvelous light of the Gospel as the Lamb of God that taketh away the sins of the world. And so as children of God and heirs to eternal life through Christ Jesus we are called upon by the words of our text, to shine forth, to reflect in our own lives, that divine love and light that has called us out of the darkness of sin and death and made us Children of God and heirs of heaven with Christ.

This is indeed a most solemn responsibility. One that should not be taken lightly, nor **can** the Christian take it lightly. For it is a responsibility that is so despised and resented by our Old Adam and at the same time so joyfully welcomed by the new man created in Christ unto all good works.

Therefore, so that the Old Adam within us might daily be put to death and the New Man encouraged in a sanctified life in thought, word and deed, Our Most Gracious God seeks to focus our attention upon:

"The Debt of Christian Love"

And that we might come to understand it is:

- I. A *continuous debt*,
- II. A *debt owed to all by all, and*
- III. A *practical debt*.

The first verse of our text tells us to "**Owe no man anything, but to love one another...**".

Our text is speaking to us here of *continuous* debts.

It is not a sin for a Christian to borrow money, but it is sin to borrow and not repay the debt. Psalm 37:21 says it in this way: "*The Wicked borroweth, and payeth not again...*"

When a person borrows money or anything else, such a debt is to be repaid as soon as possible and in full. That is the way the Christian handles his debts.

But it cannot not be so with the debt of Christian love. For, this is a debt that can never be fully paid.

Most emphatically our text states: "**Owe no man anything, but to love one another.**" We are always to love one another.

In other words, there is never to be a time in the Christian's life when he is without obligation on this point. All his daily thought, speech and actions are to find their motivating source in true Christian love for his fellow man.

And this is as true today, amidst all the acts of international terrorism, political hate and personal hate we see around us. Just as it was in Paul's day, when abject lovelessness and hatred reared its evil head in the horrible persecution and cruel torture of Christians.

Against this dark backdrop of hate and lovelessness, it was and still is God's command that we should, as Jesus commands in John 13:34, "*...love one another, as I have loved you...*"

And so, it is truly a *continuous* debt.

Dear Ones, Our love for one another is not to be as though it were an intermittent spring shower, but it should be a continuous rain, just as the precious, undeserved love of Jesus for us is constant and abides forever.

Are your thoughts, words and deeds grounded in true Christian love? Is our criticism of our neighbor, our children, our spouse, or our fellow Christian really based in love or have we at times allowed that Old Man of Sin to gain the upper hand?

Yes, the Old Adam that yet lives within each and everyone of us, against whom we daily struggle, he needs this Law of Christian love as a continuous denouncement of our inborn lovelessness, so that Man of Sin might daily be held in check, overcome, and drowned in daily contrition and true repentance.

Oh, the disastrous results if this is not done!

Thus was the end result of the covetousness of Judas, death by suicide, and the thievery of Ananias and Sapphira, who thought they could lie to the Holy Spirit and steal from God--they fell to the ground dead--one shortly after the other right at the apostles feet.

Lovelessness literally means death, the wages of all sin.

On the other hand, as new creatures created by the Grace of God in Christ after true godliness and holiness, we gladly receive this debt of Christian love as a directive from our Redeemer and King, since the motivation for true Christian love... the motivation for those thoughts, speech and actions that are truly God-pleasing ... can only be provided by Christ's love for us as it is revealed to us in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

And it is a debt owed by all to all. In this respect it also differs from all other debts. Our debt of loyalty to our country is confined to a certain area of our lives. Our debt to a bank for our home mortgage or car loan as well as other debts to other merchants is confined to them. This debt of Christian love, however, is a debt owed to all.

In Romans chapter 12, St. Paul has listed individuals and groups to whom the Christian owes the debt of Christian love. The pastor owes this debt of love to his congregation, the Sunday School teacher to his or her students. The Christian owes it to his fellow Christian. We owe it to the poor and needy. To those down-trodden and distressed.

And not only to these, but also to those who are farthest removed from us--to those whom our Old Adam resents the most. For do we not receive the exhortation in verse fourteen of Romans chapter twelve to: "*Bless them that persecute you, bless, and curse not.*"?

How can we truly bless someone, and more, how can that person be truly blessed if the blessing isn't motivated by Christian love?

Furthermore each and every child of God owes this debt of love.

Verse 8 and 9 of our text tells us "...he *that loveth another hath fulfilled the law. For this, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Thou shalt not covet; and if there be any other commandment, it is briefly comprehended in this saying, namely, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.*"

You see how each and every time the word "Thou" is used again and again ?
 God is talking to you and me each and every one of us personally.

Is there anything more powerful to refute the many excuses that our sinful flesh makes against loving our fellowman than these Holy Words of God's Law?

Is there anything more powerful that will motivate you to love your fellow man than the precious love of God in Christ Jesus, the love that has redeemed you from sin and eternal death? **No.** His love, His living a sinless life and becoming obedient unto death, even the death of the cross, fulfilled the law in our place and in heartfelt gratitude we, as Children of God should follow his example. No Christian is exempted from this debt of love.

And so in the verse we just read, we have also set before us how the debt of Christian love is paid in and out of marriage, in work, in business, and professions, in court, in daily conversations, and last but not least, also in the Christian's thinking and desiring.

This is therefore also a practical debt, a debt to be paid each and every day of our life of sanctification. It is not a mere ideal, as though it were an old book to be set upon the highest book shelf of our lives to gather dust, but it is an ideal put into action.

"Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself."

God-given love in Christ hates evil and so it **actively** shuns that which harms our neighbor, just as we actively avoid those things in this life that are detrimental to our own well-being.

In addition, Christian love **actively** seeks out and does only that which is good for our neighbor, just as we actively seek out those things which benefit us in our own lives.

"Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself."

This statement is best explained by Christ, Himself, when He says in Matthew 7:12:

"...all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets."

Furthermore, the will and power to pay this debt of love comes from God alone. Philippians 2:13 says it all in this respect:

"...it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure."

In Christ the Christian is the "beloved of God, called to be a saint."

In God's grace and love for each individual commended to us in the Gospel: *"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."* In God's grace and love offered and given to us individually in Baptism and Holy Communion, we are assured of the forgiveness of our sins and more, the power from God on high to "will and to do according to His good pleasure."

May we daily find comfort and peace for our souls in the undeserved cancellation of our debt of sin in Christ Jesus and new willingness, motivation and power in Him to be more prompt in the payment of love's debt toward one another. Amen.

And now may the peace of God, the love of Christ and the communion of the Holy Spirit keep your hearts and minds as the beloved of God, called to be saints, in Christ Jesus. Amen.