

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 24, 2017
Romans 13:1-10
Our Outstanding Debt of Love to Our Neighbor
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Dear Friends in Christ Jesus,

Paying off a debt is a good thing. It is a joyful thing. I do not know anyone, do you, who is sad when they write the check for their last car payment after 5 years? I do not remember seeing any long faces when we burned the mortgage at one of my former congregations. Think of your own current outstanding indebtedness. I'll suggest it is more of a burden than a joy to carry.

There is one debt that remains outstanding. We can never pay it off, nor should we. This debt is not a burden to bear. It is a joy to carry over from day to day. Paul tells us what that debt is, "the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law."

One area in which we pay that debt of love that remains outstanding is to our neighbors who have authority over us in the government. Christian citizenship recognizes that God has established all such authority. Christian citizenship is **Our Outstanding Debt of Love to Our Neighbor**. It is because of God's undeserved love for us. It includes our government authorities.

The apostle Paul wrote this letter to the Christians in Rome early in Nero's rule as Caesar. Historians say those years were relatively benign compared to Nero's later years. Still, Rome was ruled by a heathen. The city was full of idol worship. The Roman Empire was not the easiest place for a Christian either Jew or Gentile to live.

I'm telling you this because it is important that Paul wrote these words under the Holy Spirit's inspiration. He did not write to them by what he saw, or how non-Christians approach citizenship; if the government is good to me and I like it, I will obey it. If not, I will disobey or rebel against it.

The Christian's ongoing debt of love is because of God's undeserved love for us. Earlier Paul exhorted the Christians "in view of God's mercy, offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God-this is your true and proper worship."[12:1]

In the New Testament church, we do not offer the blood of animals to God. We offer up our lives in love to our neighbors. We do not sacrifice by command but in freedom and in joy and in love because of Jesus Christ our Savior. The basis for my debt of love in being a good citizen is not the cop standing on the corner looking at me. It is my Redeemer hanging on his cross dying for me, then rising from the dead triumphant over all my spiritual enemies-sin, death and the devil.

"Love is the fulfillment of the law." God gives us only one command, "Love." It is a command I am not able to keep by nature. So, the Holy Spirit has renewed in me a new heart and a right spirit of love. God's love in Christ is no mere example of love. God's love in Christ is the power of love. Jesus' love for me does no harm to me. Therefore, in love I will do no harm to my neighbor. This is my debt of love. Paying the debt does not earn me anything. It is a debt that is ongoing as is God's love for me in Christ. We agree with the Holy Spirit, don't we? "Love does no harm to a neighbor."

That love for my neighbor has very practical applications the individual commandments express. These expressions of our joyful debt of love to our neighbor are personal. Love is protecting my neighbor's spouse and marriage. It is protecting my neighbor's body and property. Love does not covet what is not rightfully mine. These and the rest of God's commandments are not separate commandments but expressions of the one command, "Love your neighbor as yourself."

Paul makes the specific application of our outstanding debt of love to our neighbor to God's representative. It includes our government authorities.

Luther called the government, "God's left hand." God's right hand is the gospel that takes care of the spiritual government or kingdom of God. God's left hand takes care of our material and bodily good in the secular government or earthly kingdom. One has nothing to do with the function of the other. Yet both are God's representatives on earth through which he acts in blessing. Both are objects of our joyful ongoing debt of love.

The Holy Spirit makes it clear that God establishes governments on earth. "For there is no authority except that which God has established." God does not tell people what kind of governments to establish. God does not

say one form of government is pleasing to him and others aren't. God does not by force make people govern as he wants them to govern. This may result in injustice and even harm. This does not mean God has not established government. It means those in authority are not governing the way God wants. This does not mean I am free to rebel. The only time we are to disobey is when they command us to go against God's will. Then, "We are to obey God rather than men."

God has established ruling authorities to take care of us while we live on earth. They too protect our marriages. They protect our bodies and lives. They protect our property from those who covet and want to steal it. Rulers do not govern perfectly. At times they act unwisely, even in contradiction to God's laws. These wrongs do not cancel out, or release us from our outstanding debt of love for our neighbor which includes our government authorities.

The government is to do us good. It has the authority to punish evildoers by wielding the sword that includes death. "The one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for nothing." This debt of love may also include other things we owe: "If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor."

John Locke, the English philosopher during the Enlightenment, among many other political views believed that revolution not only was a right but an obligation in some circumstances. Not so. The Holy Spirit says, "Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established."

The Christian views citizenship as our ongoing debt of love to our neighbor. This love is part and parcel of our "living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God." Yes, there is the fear of punishment if we do wrong. But that is not the only reason we obey those in authority. "submit to the authorities also as a matter of conscience." I submit to them because my Father in heaven has told me such obedience is the right thing to do. My love is not forced by the long arm of the law but freely given under God's hand lovingly outstretched in Christ. Amen. <SDG>