

“Owe Me Love”

Romans Wasn't Read in a Day – part #9

Romans 13:7-14

[title slide] *Welcome, prayer.*

[Arlington Tomb] Last fall, our family took a vacation to Washington D.C. One afternoon, we visited Arlington National Cemetery to watch the changing of the guard at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. It was very somber and symbolic, and there were signs posted everywhere asking people to respect the silence and dignity of the place. Of course, that didn't stop some people from talking, but I will say, the guard took his job serious, and he yelled at the crowd, “Please respect the silence of the Tomb!” His point, especially with his rifle to emphasize it, was well taken.

[Respect] Think about the phrase, “paying our respects.” We pay our respects and honor the dead. We visit cemeteries. We show our respect with silence at weddings, funerals, and other ceremonies. We honor our veterans and military, standing and saluting when they march by in a parade. From a young age, we are taught to give our respect and honor to those who deserve it.

There is, however, another trend, which I've often heard specifically in the education world. Teachers now talk about having to earn respect. In other words, even though you have a certain status or position, you still have to show others around you that you care about them first, before you can demand their attention, respect, and obedience.

For most of us, it is unnatural to honor others we think “don't deserve it.” As a pastor, I hope I both earn the respect of my congregation as well as deserve it. But I don't want to take it for granted.

[Jesus] On the other hand, the Bible teaches us to honor others even if they don't act with kindness and good manners. Jesus says, “Love your enemies.” (Matthew 5:44) The Apostle Paul says in Romans 13:7, “Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.”

This can be hard to do, and it certainly takes practice. My wife, Katja, works in retail, and often she'll tell me how she respected customers who were not easy

to honor or love. Generally, those customers were impatient, stubborn, and rude. In other words, they're human, like the rest of us! I think my wife is one of the most patient people in this world. We're still married, after 20 years!

[Romans 13:7-8] Paul says we are to "owe no one anything but love." (Romans 13:8) So, what does that mean? Many of you might know the Beatles song. Fill in this lyric: "I don't care too much for money. *Money can't buy me love.*" Anyone who has tried to buy someone's love knows that truth. You can't put a price tag on true love. You can't buy enough presents to force someone to love you. And if you receive oodles and oodles of gifts, but the object of your affection refuses to talk to you, spend time with you, or even listen to you, that love is very empty. Owing love has nothing to do with money.

[Romans 5:8] To owe someone love is to love them in spite of themselves, to love them unconditionally, even in spite of your own opinion on whether or not they "deserve" your love. In other words, to love the way God loves us. Romans 5:8 sums that thought up quite pointedly: "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

If God loves us unconditionally, then God has the right to tell us how to love. Consider the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5). The first four focus on loving God. The next six tell us how to love others. When the Pharisees tested Jesus about God's law, Jesus said they could be summed up into two simple commands: love God and love others. (Matthew 22:37-40) True, biblical love has a vertical and a horizontal component, yet loving God and loving other are two sides of the same coin. This is what we are called to do.

[Why? - arguing] So let me dive into the hardest part. We are Christians, correct? We are called to love, correct? So why is it so hard? While we freely accept love when we don't deserve it, we still struggle to give it to those we disagreed with, who don't look, act, and talk like we do. In other words, we struggle against tribalism in this society.

[1 Cor. 13] To overcome ourselves, we should focus on what the Bible says about love. The best picture comes from 1st Corinthians 13:4-6. "Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth."

Since the Bible tells us what love is, we have no excuse to be unloving. In fact, even non-Christians inherently know what love is.

[1 John 4] Love is a gift from God. That's why we can owe love to others – it wasn't ours to keep in the first place. Listen to 1 John 4:7-8: "...Love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love." So, how can we say we love others if we don't know God? And how can we say we love God if you treat others poorly? If people don't see love in us, we have no right to claim to be Christians or even share the gospel.

[Romans 13:11-12] Paul makes one more point in Romans 13 to grab our attention. Each day we are alive is one day closer to when we'll meet Christ. That means, each day gone by is one more opportunity to love God and love others, and each day we refuse to do that is one chance we lose. Paul is quite adamant about Christians are to live, for our own sakes and for the sake of the world. Paul tells us to put aside our darkness, to confess and believe in Christ's forgiveness. If we do that, our shame and guilt disappear, and are replaced by God's love.

[Romans 13:13] Looking at verse 13 reveals a pretty sad list. Paul says, the works of evil, or darkness, include wild living, sexual sins, drunkenness, addiction, dissension and jealousy. It's a world of "anything goes." So often, I hear someone say, "But I'm not hurting anyone!" and I think, actually, you are not only hurting yourself, you are also hurting others who want what's best for you, and you are most definitely hurting your relationship with God. In contrast, Paul says, "Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law." (Romans 13:10)

[Is it worth it?] In 1st Corinthians 10:23, Paul concedes that, "All things are permissible, but not all things are beneficial." You can choose to live your life however you want. Be aware, though, that there are temporary and eternal consequences we face. In Galatians 5:15, Paul warns the church, "If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other." Sadly, we are still learning in God's church to stop the crazy back-biting.

[Title slide] So here's what I'm going to do about it, and I hope you'll join me. First, I am going to believe, by God's grace, I can love others without agreeing with them. Second, I am going to believe that God has a purpose for

each person in my life, and that the only way we will discover it is if I make room in my own heart to simply love them, not judge them, discourage them, or even ignore them.

[Megaphone] A while ago, there was a video posted on social media of a boy preaching the gospel on a sidewalk with the microphone and speaker, and police came up and arrested him. My first reaction was, “Oh, how awful.” But then I dug deeper into the story. This boy, without permission, was disrupting a peaceful gathering of some other people he disagreed with. I thought, Did he ever go up to any of them and introduce himself? Did he ever have an actual conversation with those he was hurting? Did those people take a microphone and speaker to his church and interrupt the sermon? What the boy did was not preaching, nor was it loving. It was obnoxious, and it gives the rest of us Christians a bad name. Free speech does not equal hate speech. The gospel is not a weapon. The gospel is a proclamation of peace.

What I am saying is, we all must believe we have the power to change the world, including the rhetoric that we are now faced with. We can change the world with the love of Christ.

[Flowers] Paul tells us to put on armor of light. (v.12) (You can read about the armor of God in Ephesians 6.) He says, “Clothe yourself in Christ.” (v.14) I like that image. Clothes are one of the first things you notice about someone. They are expressions of who we are and how we want to be perceived. I’m wearing my Sunday clothes right now. Sometimes I wear a robe or a clergy shirt. You should have seen the looks on people’s faces last Sunday when I walked into a small restaurant. One guy took off his hat. I thought he was going to stand up and kiss my hand!

We need to put off the darkness and put on Christ. Paul is essentially saying, get naked of the things you shouldn’t do. Cast them aside, take them off. Instead, put on the coverings of Christ – his love, his actions, and his words. Don’t wear a literal costume. Make your life so much like his that people see it and are naturally drawn to you.

I know this works. In college, my nickname was Flanders, as in, Ned Flanders, the ridiculous Christian on the sitcom, “The Simpsons.” It was weird, but I owned it. The funny thing is, after 25 years, when I talk to my old college

friends, they respect and love me. We are always pleased to meet again. It's great when I can tell them that I became a pastor.

[title slide] Paul says it is time to wake up, spiritually speaking. The best way to prepare yourself to meet Jesus is to practice loving others. It should come as no surprise to us. Jesus said in Matthew 25:40, "What you did for the least of these, you did for me." So let us owe nothing but love, to each other and to the world.

Let's pray.

Memory Verse: Romans 13:10

"Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law."

Reflection Questions:

1. What debts have you incurred, financially and relationally?
2. When have you forgiven someone's debt?
3. What does Paul mean, "Owe no one anything, except to love each other"?
Is this something you try to do?
4. Name one specific way someone has shown love to you. How did you receive that love?
5. How is God's law summed up by "loving one another"? How do we practice this as a church?
6. Have you received God's love? Have you given that love to others?