

## PASTORAL PRAYER

Loving God, we come to reorient. The time is now to come back to you, away from our selfish agendas. Holy God, when our eyes are intentionally closed, guide us with courage to open them. Holy God, when our feet are heavy, give us the strength to walk with them. Holy God, when our way has no light, give us enough light to keep us going toward the right destination. Hear our prayers said here and in our hearts, that we may be yours.

Gracious God, you gave us the word of scripture through the ages. Those words guided many throughout time to what really matters and how to live well in times of trouble and times of ease. Help us, God, to realize that despite the many words, the many phrases, the many jots and tittles that make scripture, there is one thread that ties it all together. Help us, God, to learn the language of love, the language of agape. Unconditional love is a title we find so appealing. We want to live it each and every day, but, God, when it comes down to it, the old habits take hold and we lose the meaning. We find ourselves getting easily wrapped up in what we want and leave unconditional love for another day. Help us to live into that debt that can never be repaid and allow ourselves to give to others in the same way. We pray all these things in the name of the Lord to whom we are indebted forever, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray together, saying...

## SERMON

Our world is unfortunately built on debt. It's the structure of a loan: you get all this money at once, and then you pay it back with interest over time. Students and those just out of school especially have to deal with that beautiful fact. Sometimes it is inevitable, especially if you need a new car. Debt is a part of our world, but we seek to avoid it. Scripture says as much: "Owe one another nothing." The laborer deserves to be paid, but it

is not healthy to get caught up in large heaping loads of debt. We shouldn't owe money; it steals our health and well being to owe too much. But there is a debt that is essential. This passage tells us to owe love to one another. It may not seem so, but this is debt. In fact, it is one debt we must owe.

I seem to talk about the concept a lot: love. We heard about it last week; we hear a different slant this week. Well, to be honest, I talk about it as much as it comes up in scripture. And I don't think that we can talk about it too much. Here we have another take on the matter from the Apostle Paul. He speaks of it in two parts with two important messages: "Owe no one anything, except to love one another," and "the one who loves another has fulfilled the law." Those are pretty unique, complicated, and strange phrases. It is a debt to one another to love. When we love fully, we bring scripture to fullness. What we have here are statements of deficit and completion. Let's understand a faithful deficit when we speak of to "owe no one anything, except to love another," and the completion of it all when "the one who loves one another has fulfilled the law."

The other day, I went to a local farm to pick strawberries. As I went searching through the bushes to find the most ripe and delicious ones I could find, I started thinking about what I was doing. Whom did I owe for these things? I have to pay the farmers, but it's not just about them and me. I understood that these bushes were not the farmers'; the farmer was simply growing and nurturing them the best they could. I was not buying the strawberries as such; I was paying the farmers back for their stewardship to the land and to its growth. The one we really stand in debt to is God. God gave us all of these things on this earth, and it is our job to use them well for the benefit of all. This is a debt that is

obvious. What can we give back to God for all of these things? There is a wonderful thing that Paul names immediately.

“Owe one another nothing,” says Paul. Stay out of debt. That’s an important life lesson I think none of us would disagree with. Then he follows it up with a different kind of debt: “except to love one another.” How is this debt? Paul is making a little rhyme we cannot see in English, as the words for “debt” and “love” in the Greek rhyme, according to the New Interpreter’s Commentary. The word for love here is “agape.” We talk about love without a lot of reflection. I just have nice positive feelings toward another person or it’s the deep feelings I have with a family member. I don’t do anything bad toward another person, and that means that I love them. But we aren’t talking about the love for family or a spouse. We cast a wider net in these walls. We’re going back to agape, the unconditional love. It drives us to debt ourselves and to put others in our debt. As the New Interpreter’s Commentary says, the Apostle Paul consistently frames love as other-centered instead of things that are self-pleasing. To live a life of love means that we don’t please ourselves; we please the other person. To live a life of love means that we sacrifice. I know that watching football every weekend isn’t my wife’s #1 priority, but she loves me. We give up something important for the benefit of the other. That is the essence of debt. When you sacrifice for another person, you give up something of yourself...time, talent, money, possessions, any of these and more. They become indebted to you. But that’s not the point. It’s not something that we lord over one another to get what we want or show off our sacrifice. That is self-centered. If it truly is love, that means that this never happens. Love creates indebtedness for others and puts others in our debt. Our love should be like that of God, who gave us this world and all of its gifts. All God asked us to use it for the benefit of all and to love one

another in return. We are endlessly in debt, but God doesn't give us a guilt trip. God says live well. These debts are not scary things like a car loan or student loans; they are blessed things. This is debt we live in and others live in for us.

The final part of the sentence reveals another side. We live in the debt of God and the debt of one another when we love, but that is for a very special reason: "the one who loves one another has fulfilled the law." There is an ancient story about an old Rabbi named Hillel, who spoke with the wisdom of Jesus before Jesus' time. The story goes that a gentile, a non-Jew, came up to Hillel and said that if he could recite the whole Torah as he stood on one leg, that gentile would become Jewish. Hillel stood up on one leg and said pointedly, "That which is hateful to you do not do to your neighbor. This is the Torah; the rest is commentary. Go and learn." Hillel didn't know Paul, but it could be that Paul knew of Hillel and knew his wisdom. It wasn't a unique thought, but it was unique way of putting it; in fact, both Paul and Jesus rephrased it in special ways.

Today, there is term for actions that you can take to make everyday activities a little easier. They are called "life hacks." For example, the website [1000lifehacks.com](http://1000lifehacks.com) states if you rub canola or olive oil on a knife before you cut an onion, it will prevent your eyes from tearing up. That's worth trying. Also, if you get a splinter, mix up water and baking soda and put it on the spot of the splinter; it'll help the splinter work its way out! These are pretty neat, but I can give you one better. This little statement is essentially the Apostle Paul's version of a life hack: "the one who loves another has fulfilled the law." At first, that phrase seems to be a nice "sunshine and lollypops" way of saying that if you love one another, you've done OK. You've essentially accomplished the mission, but we're painting over the cracks. One feels that there are so many other essential commandments that

aren't being fulfilled by that! Actually, that's not correct. According to commentary on the podcast Sermon Brainwave, Paul's statement is an honest-to-goodness truth. In the past month, we talked a lot about the difference between the Word of the Law and the Spirit of the Law. The Word of the Law is following the exact written words to the letter, no matter what. The Spirit of the Law is discerning what is the main point behind those words and what's the main idea. This little life hack is Paul's way of getting to the heart of the matter. He lists off some of what we know as the Ten Commandments and points back to his main idea. "You shall not commit adultery." "You shall not murder." "You shall not steal." "You shall not covet." It all makes sense when you give it the important background: love your neighbor. If you love your neighbor, you won't commit adultery. If you love your neighbor, you won't steal anything. Of course, if you love your neighbor, you won't murder them.

Jesus gave us some actionable items. Those Ten Commandments and the lesson of Rabbi Hillel are not active things; they are passive. In other words, they are the "do not do" things, which are often very easy. I can simply sit on my bottom and not do a lot of things, but that doesn't make me a good Christian. I have to live well and actively to be a faithful Christian. Love is not a feeling in scripture; it drives us to move, to do, to be more so than anything else. It is active, not passive. True Love is "do," not "do not do" at its base. Active and good love is the story behind scripture. Jesus later took that idea that Hillel told that gentile and turned that passive way, "that which is hateful, do not do to your neighbor," and made it a positive, an active statement: "Do unto others as you would have done unto you." In these statements are the true forms of love. From all these lessons, it is clear that love is the basis, the force, the reason behind all of scripture.

Financially, Paul advises we should stray from debt as much as possible. That makes fiscal and just good overall life sense. Who wants to be in debt? However, as people of faith, we are to be in debt as much as possible. It's a different kind of debt; this debt comes from love. The debt of love is three-fold: it is the force behind scripture, as true love "fulfills the law." It is active, not passive. It is not feeling; it is sacrifice. It is giving of ourselves in ways that put others in our debt and us into other's debt. We don't call on that debt; we recognize it as a reality of love if we are truly loving. We can get caught up in a lot of rules and regulations with the Christian life. However, friends, it ought not be so. When we are loving everyone, from your spouse to the person who walks up from the street that you've never seen before, the answer is to love...completely and unconditionally, and the law will be fulfilled. Thanks be to God for this wisdom throughout all of life. Amen and Amen.