

To God Alone Be The Glory

I have bad news for you. Someone present here today or watching at home owes a very large debt. They may not know about. It's someone whose name is inside this envelop. But first let me give you some good news: the debt is payable. Now back to the bad news. Who is it that owes? And the envelope says... | Why, lookie lookie here! It's a St. John's member directory. And here's a school family directory. We all owe a debt.

Some of you seem surprised to learn that you owe a debt. Maybe you're asking how much it is and what's it for. As I said, this debt is payable. But it's the kind of debt that you never finish paying off in this lifetime. Well that sounds kind of depressing: never getting out of debt. Can you imagine if you could never get to the last car payment or mortgage payment?

By the end of this sermon I hope you're glad to have this kind of debt. And I hope you're joyful to make the payments. Because that's what Holy Spirit wants us to take home today from our sermon text: **PAY YOUR DEBT.**

The apostle Paul puts it this way: ⁸*Let no debt remain outstanding.* "Is that financial advice?" Just barely. It's really ethical advice. "If you have borrowed money or if you owe a fine, **PAY YOUR DEBT.** Don't default on a loan. Pay it off in a reasonable amount of time." Those who can pay off their loans and don't are engaging in a form of stealing. But beyond ethics and honesty, this passage

has little to say about finances. It's more about the debt of love we owe to everyone.

⁸*Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another.* Now if your sinful flesh is listening, it's probably copping a defiant attitude: "Why do I owe anyone love as a debt? Did I borrow a cup of love from others? No! If anything, they borrowed a gallon of love from me." Whenever that ugly sinful flesh speaks up, it's time to grab it by the neck and shove it under waters of Baptism. It needs to be told: "You have no right to speak lies here. I am a child of God, redeemed by Jesus' blood. The real me is the one who loves God. He wants me to think of loving others as a debt I owe, as if I **had** borrowed love from everyone else." It's only proper to pay what we owe, right? "Yes," says God, "**PAY YOUR DEBT of love.**"

To love is to fulfill the commandments, *for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law.* ⁹*The commandments, "Do not commit adultery," "Do not murder," "Do not steal," "Do not covet," and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: "Love your neighbor as yourself."* Did you ever think about that? All we have to do to keep the final seven commandments is love everyone. And you don't even have to be a Christian to appreciate this truth. The Beatles sang, "All you need is love." Dionne Warwick sang, "What the world needs now is love sweet love. It's the only thing that there's just too little of." The world gets it.

But as Christians we love to dig deep in to love. Paul writes: ¹⁰*Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.* That is so true! Consider the commandments Paul cites about loving our neighbor. The 6th Commandment says, “Do not commit adultery.” So all of us marrieds get to think: “I love my spouse too much to destroy the trust between us by committing adultery today, or even to look at the free dirty pictures available on the net.” And all singles get to say: “I love all the rest of you too much to ruin your marriage by sleeping with you or your spouse or your future spouse.” This is how God wants us to pay our debt of love.

How about the 5th Commandment, “Don’t murder”? 1 Samuel 2:6 teaches: “The LORD brings death and makes alive.” Ending life is a right the Lord reserves for himself. Because of that I love you too much to shorten your life or to hurt you or even to hate you. 1 John 3:15 teaches: “*Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him.*” I owe a debt of love to you. I don’t have room in my heart to hate you.

How about the 7th Commandment, “Don’t steal”? I love you too much to take what God has entrusted to you. Besides, if I take something of yours, I’d be borrowing more from you instead of paying my debt of love to you.

How about the 9th & 10th Commandments, “Don’t covet”? I love you too much even

want your things. In fact I love you so much that I’m happy when things go well for you, even if they’re going poorly for me. That’s one of the ways I’m paying my debt of love to you. I’m happy for you.

Remember how we dunked the sinful flesh earlier, in order to kill it? Well, it’s a good swimmer. Right about now your sinful flesh may be saying, “All this love is a bunch of horse hooey. The only reason I haven’t killed some of the lazy, foolish, irritating people on this planet is because I don’t want to go to jail. It’s not that I love others so much. I don’t commit adultery and fornication because I don’t want to catch an STD. As for coveting, how is it so unloving for me to dream of taking someone else’s new truck home? How does that hurt my neighbor? I’m only thinking it.”

There’s no reasoning with the sinful flesh. You can’t win that debate. Just grab it by the back of the neck again and dunk it under the waters of Baptism. And pray, “Lord, you see how inclined I am toward what is evil. Please forgive me for Jesus’ sake, and help me to walk in your paths.”

God wants us to love others because that’s how he wants to bring blessings into all lives. Do you realize how much of a blessing it would be if we didn’t have to settle disputes in court, or investigate and punish crimes? Just imagine how much cheaper clothing would be if retailers didn’t have to raise

their prices to cover all the clothing that gets stolen. Consider how much simpler life would be if we didn't have to lock our bikes or cars or homes. It all boils down to this: love your neighbor as yourself. God's ways are wise.

But God is more than wise. He loved us enough to send his own Son to pay for the times we have not been loving. Jesus teaches, "I paid your debt. It's gone. Believe it. Live like I love you. Love others from the bottom of your heart." And we say, "Okay, Savior. I'll watch for ways I can pay my debt of love to others."

A boy in a hospital waiting room was told that he had to give blood right away to save his sister's life. Only his blood matched hers. He said, "Okay," and then went around to all his relatives in the waiting room and said good-bye. When he kissed his mother and father, he was deeply moved and started crying. Finally his parents figured out that their son thought he was being asked to give all of his blood to his sister. He knew he couldn't live without blood, so he figured he was giving up his life for her. After his parents explained that his sister needed only a pint of his blood, they asked, "Would you actually be willing to die for your sister?" "Why, of course!" he said. "She's my sister, isn't she?"

Giving blood every eight weeks is a great way we can pay our debt of love to our neighbors, neighbors we will probably never meet on earth. But there's also

every-day love. Polite language is important: "Yes please. No thank you. You first. I'm sorry. I forgive you." Back up your polite language with a polite tone of voice. 'Fine' is a polite word, but it can sound awfully mean-spirited: "Fine!" Even your dog can tell the difference between loving tones and angry tones. You can say in the nicest voice, "You ugly dog. I hate your guts. I wish you would run out into the street," and your dog will think you are happy with it because of your tone of voice. You could say with a harsh voice, "I love you, you beautiful dog. Do you want to go outside for a walk?" and your dog will think you're angry at it. News flash: People are smarter than dogs. They can tell when polite words are hiding an unloving heart. Love others from the heart, even bad drivers and customer service representatives.

Touch is also important. When COVID-19 is over, let's go back to socially acceptable ways of human touch, like a hand shake or fist bump. It communicates that you are paying your debt of love. This is one reason why I like to shake your hands twice on Sunday mornings: once on the way in and once on the way out. I want you to see and feel that I love you as your pastor, even when I mess up or when you mess up. I want you to trust me so you will follow when I try to lead you closer to Christ. But I'm also hoping you'll follow my example and greet each other warmly. Show others you care. It lays the

groundwork for carrying each other's burdens, and thus paying the debt of love you owe to people in the church.

This poem encourages appropriate touching. It's called *Please Touch Me*.

*I am your baby; please touch me.
Not just when you feed and diaper me,
but stroke my legs, my arms, my back, my head.
Hold me close in tenderness that says,
"I love you."*

*I am your teenager; please touch me.
I need to feel a bond of love
coming through your hand, your arms.
I need to see it in your eyes,
hear it in your voice,
even when we disagree;
some of me is still a child.*

*I am a child with a family of my own.
Please put your arms around me,
Mother, Father.
Now that I am a parent, I see you differently
and love you even more. When you
embrace your grandchildren, don't forget me.*

*I am your aging parent, please touch me,
the way my mother did when I was young.
My hair is course and gray, but please stroke it.
Embrace my tired body; I need your strength.
Please touch me.*

—Author Unknown

Jesus understood how important touch is for paying our debt. In Matthew 8 we hear: *A man with leprosy came and knelt before [Jesus] and said, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean."* *Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!"* Lepers weren't supposed to be touched.

Then there was the time that a rich young man ran up to Jesus, fell on his knees, and asked, "*What must I do inherit eternal life?*" Jesus told him to keep the Commandments. "*I have,*" the young man boasted, "*since I was a boy.*" But he was wrong. In a moment the Lord would show the young man that he still loved money more than God. But first the passage says, *Jesus looked at him and loved him* (Mark 10:17).

You might think Jesus is setting a great example. And he is! But Jesus was also keeping the commandments for us as our Savior. He was working the good deeds that we could not accomplish to save ourselves. Jesus' good deeds, which we sometimes call "the merits of Christ," are what God offers us as a part of salvation. The merits of Christ are what our faith lays hold of and makes our personal possession. As far as God is concerned, through faith in Jesus you have loved everyone perfectly. And Jesus' death canceled out all the times you haven't.

Do you ever find it hard to pay your outstanding debt of love to others? I do, sometimes. If we are going to love each other from the heart and not just with surface love, we will have to work at it and ask God to change us. Spending more time in God's Word will help. Through God's Word the Holy Spirit loves to help us love others by pointing us to Jesus and his love for us. Be like Jesus. PAY YOUR DEBT.