

ASSUMING OUR DEBT

Sermon, September 10, 2017

Text: Romans 13:8-24

I'd like to re-read the first and the last verses of today's selection from Romans: *"Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another."* and *"Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the human nature."* "Forgive us our debts," we pray in the Lord's Prayer ... actually, we say "trespasses" here, but most Presbyterians say "debts." Yet, in spite of that repeated prayer, Paul speaks of a continuing debt we apparently owe. Think of being a Christian as being married to the Lord; by faith we are brought into His family, and as we do so, He assumes our debts, just as any spouse assumes the financial debts of the other (*unless there is some sort of prenuptial agreement, but let's keep it simple for illustration's sake!*) However, according to Paul, He leaves us one debt still outstanding, a debt we are never, ever to stop repaying ... the debt of love. And we best do that, we best LOVE, by "clothing" ourselves with Jesus Christ. What does *that* mean? I'm glad you asked!

We've all heard the old adage "clothes make the man" which means, basically, that the way we dress often reveals our character. And people make judgments of our character by seeing what we wear (*rightly or wrongly, I'm just making an observation*). The origin of that adage, "clothes make the man," is believed to be from Act I, Scene III of William Shakespeare's Hamlet, the famous scene in which Polonius gives his son some rather long-winded advice (*including "Neither a borrower nor a lender be, For loan oft loses both itself and friend."*) He says, *"Costly thy habit as thy purse can buy, But not express'd in fancy; rich, not gaudy; For the apparel oft proclaims the man."* Which basically means, *"Buy the best clothes you can afford, but don't overdress, for the clothes make, or tell us about, the man."* The word **habit** in this instance means "clothing." This is, in fact, the oldest meaning of "habit" in English, one that is preserved today in "nun's habit." In English, habit progressed from meaning "clothing" to "clothing for a particular profession or purpose" to "the bearing, conduct, behavior appropriate to one's station or calling in life" From there it came to mean: *"a behavior pattern acquired by frequent repetition."* But the oldest meaning of Habit is clothing. One's clothing often reflected one's calling, one's character and one's character is certainly discerned in part by one's physical habits. Paul tells us to clothe ourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ. In other words, put on Jesus Christ, assume that habit, that "costume," that "uniform," that behavior pattern, and all that entails!

The word "Habit" pops again in Hamlet, Act III Scene 4, Hamlet is speaking to his mother Gertrude. A modern translation renders it: *"Assume a virtue if you have it not. Habit is a terrible thing, in that it's easy to get used to doing evil without feeling bad about it. But habit is also a good thing, in that being good can also become a habit [if that habit is] aptly put on. Say no tonight, and that will make it easier to say no the next time, and still easier the time after that. Habit can change even one's natural instincts, and either rein in the devil in us, or kick him out."*

"Assume a virtue, if you have it not." Paraphrased, that means *"At least pretend to be have the virtue, even if you don't! Put that virtue on like an article of clothing, assume that habit, and behave accordingly ... you'll find it gets easier and easier to become what you are pretending to be, the more you try it!"* Echoing Shakespeare, Paul exhorts his readers to "assume Christ;" that is, at least pretend to be Christ-like, even if you are not! Clothe yourselves in Christ. Other translations render it, *"Put on the Lord Jesus Christ."* This is not *"putting Him on"* in the sense of somehow deceiving Him, but just as a nun "puts on" a habit as a reminder of her vows and commitment, so we are to make a habit out of putting on Christ. I'm not in the "habit" of quoting Shakespeare, but he makes a valid point ... Habit can be a good thing! To slightly mix metaphors, we are to make a habit out of clothing ourselves in Christ. According to Paul, we best *"put on Jesus"* by determining to **love**, by learning how to genuinely love and putting that knowledge to work, by learning to love well.

It was about thirty years ago, while serving an international congregation in Germany, I was leading a young adult Bible study group in my apartment and we were looking at this same passage from Romans. I've talked about this group at least twice before in my years in this pulpit, but the memory is so profound from my early years of ministry. Back in the late eighties, 30-35 (*sometimes more*) met for Bible study in my apartment in Bonn, Germany, and it was a miniature United Nations ... young adults from England, Scotland, Germany, Holland, Uganda, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Romania, Sweden, Thailand and the USA; we had Sarah from Sierra Leone, Ivy from Singapore, Dan from England, Jerry from Australia, Chris from Romania ... and Cindy from the land of Minnie-SO-ta. One thing I found about people working in foreign service is that not a few of them are in foreign service because they want to get away; they want to leave something behind, they want to get far, far away from a hurtful place or past. We had in our group a woman in her thirties from Thailand, who, through her preteen and young teen years, had been brutally victimized by the insidious sex trafficking of Bangkok. We had a woman from

Scotland who had been in an abusive live-in relationship during which time she had come to faith, and finding strength in her new found Christian faith, gained the self respect and confidence to pack this guy's bags and kick him out ... although he continued to stalk her. We had a school teacher in her forties who was divorced from her husband of fifteen or so years due to his incessant philandering. We had a young German sailor, now a ship's captain on a German freighter out of Kiel, who had seen more human depravity in some of the world's seaports than many of us here could even imagine. We had a young man from Uganda, the third son of one of his polygamous father's four wives. He was in his late twenties and had never, ever seen faithful monogamy modeled in his entire lifetime (*for that matter, let me state the obvious that this is no longer a problem confined to deep dark Africa ... but that's another sermon*). Many in that room had been affected, and affected adversely, by love gone bad, by the devastating effects of sexual immorality. And all had come to the church and to that Bible study fellowship group to find some measure of stability, security, sanctuary, safety ... and love, gracious love.

As literally represented in that apartment three decades ago, our world is terribly confused about love, and it has only gotten worse. So much hurt and harm have grown out of loving intentions, so much hurt and harm have grown out of misconceptions of love. Love is confused with lust, with selfishness, with passions, with feelings, with personal preference ... none of which are really the central meaning of love as defined in the Scriptures. The word "love" has been so misused in our culture that it has come to mean the same thing it does in tennis nothing! But Jesus and Paul believed love, properly understood and habitually practiced, is everything!

I vividly remember looking at this passage from Romans with that Bible study group. We read verse 13: "*Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy.*" This subject matter was an issue of more than just passing interest for them! They were there because they *wanted* to behave decently, they were there because they wanted to be *treated* decently, they were there because some had deep hurts from being treated *indecently*, and some were there who had painful memories of treating *others* indecently out of ignorance or confused ideas about love. They wanted to learn about love, how to love, how to be loved. The inevitable question arose, I think from Uganda Henry: "*What IS sexual immorality, anyway?*" I replied in so many words, "*Good question! That's a question lots of people, even in the church, even in the leadership of the church for that matter, apparently have difficulty answering!*" I continued, "*The short answer from the Bible is sexual immorality is any sexual activity contrary to God's design and plan for sexuality, which is fidelity in monogamous marriage and chastity in singleness. Period. But I'd like to save much of that for next week. For now, though, in the time we have, let's look at this text in front of us: What does it say about Love?*"

"*Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law.*" One thing to get straight is that the Bible refers to love as a duty; it is a *debt* we owe, a debt we assume! It can be, and most of the time really is, a delightful duty, but it *is* a duty. It is something we do. Love is a verb, not a noun. It's not primarily something we feel; it's something we do, something we act out; in fact, it is something we even owe to those around us because of the love and grace we have received in Jesus Christ! Then Paul goes on to define more precisely and practically what he means when he uses the word "love." He cites the latter portion of the commandments which have to do with our relationships with others, concluding they are summed up in this one rule: "*Love your neighbor as yourself.*" He goes on to clarify further, by telling us what love does NOT do: "*Love does no harm (or, wrong) to a neighbor.*" Genuine love does no harm, love does not encourage harm; love does not show itself in allowing others to be harmed, love does not pay money (*or cause others to pay money*) to see others being harmed or used or abused or misused. (*Just as an aside, every click of your mouse on an internet page/picture of pornographic material is causing harm to others. Your little click costs: it encourages advertising and expenditure that goes toward financing the cruel and destructive victimizing that is pandemic in this insidious industry. If you have trouble fighting temptation in this, maybe it will help you if you realize your seemingly private and personal participation in this only serves to fund and encourage and make possible this demonic, destructive activity that harms. Love does no harm!*) The love Paul is talking about is *not* about gratifying ourselves at another's expense. Love never involves or endorses taking, abusing, harming, stealing, coveting, sexual immorality. These are all *repellent* activities, and love is an *attractive* force. Love does not repel or harm or abuse or threaten or give another cause to fear. Rather, authentic love *seeks the other's good*, as much as we would seek our own good.

There's much more that could be said; I close with this: Every day we wake up and try to decide what is best to wear today. Well, perhaps the best fashion advice we could possibly receive is "*Clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature.*" Dress up! Put on your Jesus "habit," your Jesus "suit", and determine to play the part of the "uniform" you are wearing! And as we do so, the Spirit goes to work on us and makes it less and less of a role we are playing, and more and more an actuality of who we are becoming, thus enabling us to love well and do so much more to pay off this loving debt we all owe.