

This Week at the Creek

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Here's the text from the pastor's Sunday message:

Blest Be the Tie That Binds

Romans 13:8-10

March 9, 2008

So says Robert Fuoss: "When you see a man open the car door for his wife, you can be pretty sure that one or the other is new." Is that a debt of love? A man called the police and reported that all of his wife's credit cards had been stolen. Then he added, "But don't look too hard for the thief. He's charging less than my wife ever did." Is that a debt of love? Two lawyers were in a bank when armed robbers suddenly burst in. While several of the robbers took money from the tellers, others lined the customers, including the two lawyers, up against a wall, and began collection of their wallets and watches. That's when the first lawyer number jammed something into the second lawyer's hand. Without looking down, the second lawyer whispered, "What's this?" To which the first lawyer replied, "It's that \$250 I owe you." Is that a debt of love?

When we think of debt, we typically think of money. And in a way, so did the apostle Paul. He said that we're all debtors and that we'll always be in debt. The point he wanted to emphasize is that our greatest debt is not financial; it's spiritual. According to him, I owe you and you owe me. Each one of us owes all the rest of us the debt of love. Look again how he put this: "Let no debt remain outstanding" – and up to this point Paul was talking about finances. So far his stress was that we should always strive to pay off our financial debts as soon as possible. But then he continued: "Except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law."

So why does the apostle call love for others "a debt"? Because we're permanently in debt to Christ for the lavish love He's poured out on us. And the

only way we can ever even begin to repay this debt is by loving others. Since Christ's love will always be infinitely greater than ours, we'll always have the obligation to love our neighbors. So for as long as we're alive, we must pay this debt as often as possible, as much as possible, and to all who God brings along our path.

Yes, it's true that Paul penned some deep theology, and a lot of preachers like to delve into his theological teachings, which can be a very good thing – a good thing, that is, unless in their desire for the theological depths they overlook his ongoing simple instructions to love. To the churches of Galatia he wrote: "Use your freedom to serve one another in love; that's how freedom grows. For everything we know about God's Word is summed up in a single sentence: Love others as you love yourself." To the church at Ephesus he wrote: "Watch what God does, and then you do it, like children who learn proper behavior from their parents. Mostly what God does is love you. Keep company with Him and learn a life of love. Observe how Christ loved us. His love was not cautious but extravagant. He didn't love in order to get something from us but to give everything of Himself to us. Love like that." And in a like manner he instructed all the churches to which he wrote. Indeed, he said that it is love itself that should mark the Christian as different from the world.

Like the rest of the Bible, the apostle puts love for others in the same league with love for ourselves. Somehow we've gotten the idea that self-love is wrong. But if this were the case, it would be pointless to love our neighbors as ourselves. So let's look for a moment at self-love. Even if you have low self-esteem, you probably don't willingly let yourself go hungry. You take care of your body, clothe yourself reasonably well, make sure there's a roof over your head, and try not to let yourself be cheated or injured. This is the kind of love we all need to have for our neighbors. And interestingly enough, people who focus on others rather than on themselves rarely suffer from low self-esteem.

Paul said that loving people is always the right thing and the best thing to do. God yearns for us to love people until the day we die. And love does no wrong. If you love, you won't sleep with another person's spouse, you won't take someone's life, you won't take what isn't yours, you won't always be wanting what you don't have, you won't talk bad to people and you won't talk bad about them. It makes sense that if you love someone, you will do them no harm; in fact, I believe love is in alliance with our seeking justice for all people. But it finally adds up to this: Love other people as well as you do yourself. For you can't go wrong when you love others. When you add up everything in the biblical law, the sum total is love!

In his first epistle, the apostle Peter put it this way: "Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins." Did you catch that

opening phrase? Above all! But as much as we know that we're supposed to love all people, it's not always easy to do. People offend us. People irritate us. And some of them dislike us. And of course, they do things we don't agree with, but still, we are to demonstrate love to everyone as best we can.

In one of his numerous books, Tony Campolo tells about seeing the play "Raisin in the Sun," in which an African-American family inherits \$10,000 from their father's life insurance policy. The mother of the house sees a chance to escape the ghetto life of Harlem and move into a little house with flower boxes out in the countryside. The brilliant daughter of the family sees in the money the chance to live out her dream to go to medical school. But the older brother has a plan that's difficult to ignore. He begs for the money so that he and his "friend" can go into business together. He tells the family that with the money he can make something of himself and make things good for the rest of them — that he could use the money to make a lot more money. He promises that if he can just have the money, he'll give back to the family all the blessings that their hard lives have denied them.

Against her better judgment, the mother gives in to the pleas of her son. She has to admit that life's chances have never been good for him and that he deserves the chance that this money might give him. But as you might suspect, the so-called friend skips town with the money. The desolate son has to return home and break the news to the family that their hopes for the future have been stolen and their dreams for a better life are gone.

Immediately his sister lashes into him with a barrage of critical words. Because her contempt for her brother has no limits, she calls him every despicable thing she can think of. But when she takes a breath in the midst of her tirade, the mother interrupts her and says, "I thought I taught you to love him!" The daughter answers, "Love him? There's nothing left to love." That's when the mother responds, "There's always something left to love! And if you ain't learned that, you ain't learned nothing. Have you cried for that boy today? I don't mean for yourself and this family because we lost all that money. I mean for him, for what he's been through and what it done to him. Child, when do you think is the time to love somebody the most: When they done good and make things easy for everybody? Well then, you ain't through learning, because that ain't the time at all. It's when he's at his lowest and can't believe in himself cause the world done whipped him so. When you start measuring somebody, measure him right, child, measure him right. Make sure you take into account what hills and valleys he came through before he got to where he is."

And the mother in that play was right: There's always something left to love. Indeed, to demonstrate love when someone is at his lowest point in life is

genuine love. And I promise you this: Loving people in this way will help to make your whole life count for something huge – and even more so, for something eternal. The beloved poet Tennyson put it this way in words quite familiar to most of us: "I hold it true, whate'er befall; / I feel it, when I sorrow most; / 'Tis better to have loved and lost / Than never to have loved at all."

A recent gospel song says that "Love isn't love until you give it away." It means taking risks. It means making sacrifices. The apostle Paul taught that obeying the love command is itself the fulfillment of all the other commandments. But mere outward conformity isn't what God desires. He wants sincere love – an honest, consistent concern for other people that spills over into actions of all kinds.

Orphaned when he was twelve and then forced to work fourteen hours a day in a sweatshop, John Fawcett learned to read by candlelight back in the late 1700s. A couple of years later at the age of sixteen he came to Christ under the preaching of George Whitefield. Nine years later at the age of 25 he was ordained into the pastoral ministry. His first pastorate was at a very poor church at Wainsgate in northern England. The small congregation could only afford to pay him a very minimal salary, partly in potatoes and wool.

But after seven years of ministry at this small church, Fawcett received a call to the far more wealthy and far more prestigious Carter's Lane Church in London. He made all the preparations to move south, but on his last Sunday at Wainsgate, as he was saying his farewells and saw the tears on the faces of his people, he changed his mind and decided to stay. It wasn't long after that decision that he wrote this hymn for his small but loving congregation. He recognized that the bond of love he knew this church had was worth more than any material wealth he could imagine, and so he wrote: "Blest be the tie that binds / Our hearts in Christian love: / The fellowship of kindred minds / Is like to that above."

Let us pray: May our love for each other, Lord, resemble the love that You richly pour out to us. Indeed, may the world know we are Christians by our love. So help us, Lord, to love You and to love our neighbor and to love all those whom You bring along in our life's pathway. In Jesus' name and for His sake, we pray.

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