Pastor Barry South, CP First Presbyterian Church Grand Bay September 6, 2026

Sermon: Debts and Time
Scripture: Romans 13:8-14

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The Commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself". Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is fulfilling of the law. Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires. THIS IS THE WORD OF THE LORD!

For churches in the United States, this Sunday falls just before Labor Day and the beginning of the program year for most congregations. Coming off a long summer, when many parishioners may have been on vacation, the beginning of the new school year for students and teachers of all ages. This Sunday may tempt us to apply Paul's exhortation "To wake from sleep" (v11) to the life of our congregation in general. While Paul's theology here refers to something considerably deeper than beginning a new program year, it does seem a good time to remind ourselves of the urgency of our mission as Christians. This urgency in Paul relates not only to his perception that Christ's return may be imminent, but also to his understanding of the immensity of the task before the young churches. Nothing less than working with God toward the transformation of the world. These two thousand years later, that task still sits at the center of the mission of the church and is no less urgent for the passage of time or the many failures and missed opportunities to live into God's realm along the way.

Paul sees that our part of this mission will be fulfilled only if Christians begin with how they react with neighbors, presumably both neighbors in the church and those outside it.

The previous passage dealt with what might be called public debts. Verse 7, "Pay to all what is due them – taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due".

There are what Paul calls tributes, and what he calls taxes. The tribute must be paid by those who are members of a nation that is under rule of another. The Roman government levied on such nations three Tributes. There was a *ground tax,* one-tenth of all grain, and one-fifth of wine and fruit produced by their land. There was *income tax*, which was 1 percent of a man's income. There was a *poll tax*, which was paid by everyone between ages 14 and 65. By Taxes, Paul means local taxes, taxes for use of main roads, for crossing bridges, for entry into markets harbors, for the right to possess an animal, drive a cart or wagon. Paul insists that Christians must pay their tributes and taxes, however galling it might be.

Then he turns to private debts. He says, "Owe no one anything". He goes on to speak of the one debt that must be paid every day, and yet, at the same time, must continue to be owed every day - the debt to love one another. It is Paul's claim that if people honestly seek to discharge this debt of love, they will automatically keep all the commandments.

Verses 8-10 take us back to the core values of chapter 12. Paul returns in particular to the centrality of love. This presents us with a constant challenge, since in English we use the word "love" to refer almost exclusively to emotion, and we tie it to how we feel about things as distinct as ice cream and our children. Paul, however, makes it clear that love has very little to do with emotion. The examples of love which he refers have to do with behavior rather than feelings. Love fulfills the commandments not to break marriage vows and not to murder, steal, or covet. These commandments concern action, not emotion. Christians will not kill, for love never seeks to destroy, but always to build up; it is always kind and will never seek to destroy, enemies not by killing them, but by seeking to make friends of them.

Love will never steal, for love is always more concerned with giving than with getting. Our neighbors will know that we love them by how we treat them. "Love your neighbor as yourself." (v10)
As though laying out his own take on the Hippocratic oath, Paul tells us that love does no harm to a neighbor. Jesus has already nicely defined "Neighbor" to include any human being with whom we interact. We fulfill the law by acting in a loving way toward our families, our enemies, our friends, the clerk in the convenience store, or our boss at work. This love is not to be kept a secret among the small circle of believers in a congregation, or in one's heart. There is to be no mystery about how we act in God's name. In fact, it is only through Christians living their love in action that disciples will be prepared for the time that Christ returns, or that the world will know of Christ and thus be ready for the transformative realm to come.
Like so many great men, Paul was haunted by the shortness of time. But there was more in Paul's though than simply shortness of time. He expected the second coming of Christ. The early church expected it at any moment, and therefore it had the urgency to be ready.
That expectancy has grown dim and faint; but one permanent fact remains: not one of us knows when God will rise and bid us to go. The time grows even shorter, for we are every day one day nearer that time. We, too, must have all things ready.
The last words of this passage have achieved a lasting fame, for it is through them that Augustine found conversion. He was walking in the garden. His heart was in distress, because of his failure to live the good life. He kept exclaiming miserably: "How long? How long? Tomorrow and tomorrow – why not now? Why not this hour an end to my depravity?" Suddenly he heard a voice saying: "Take and read; take and read." It sounded like a child's game in which these words occurred but could think of none. He hurried back to the seat where his friend Alypius was sitting, for he had left there a volume of Paul's writings. I snatched it up and read silently the first passage my eyes fell upon: "Let us not walk in revelry or drunkenness, in immorality and in shamelessness, in contention and in strife.
But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, as a man puts on a garment, and stop living a life in which your first thought is to gratify the desires of Christless human nature." I neither wished nor needed to read further. With the end of that sentence, as though the light of assurance had poured into my heart, all shades of doubt were scattered. I put my finger in the page and closed the book: I turned to Alypius with calm countenance and told him." Out of his word, God had spoken to Augustine. It was Samuel Taylor Coleridge who said that he believed the Bible to be inspired because, as he put it, "It finds me." God's word can always find the human heart.
It is interesting to look at the six sins which Paul selects as being typical of the Christian life. There is **revelry,** originally meaning a band of friends who accompanied a victor home from the games, singing his praises and celebrating his triumph as they went. Later, it came to mean a noisy band of revelers who swept through the streets at night. It describes that which is undignified, and which is a nuisance to others.
There is **drunkenness**. To the Greeks, drunkenness was a particularly disgraceful thing. They were a wine drinking people. Even children drank wine.
For all that, drunkenness was considered especially shameful, for the wine the Greeks drank was much diluted, and was drunk because the water supply was inadequate and dangerous. This was a vice which not just Christians, but any respectable person would have condemned.
There was **immorality (Debauchery)**, which literally means bed and has in it the meaning of the desire for the forbidden bed. The word brings to mind people who set no value in fidelity and who take pleasure when and where they will.
There is **shamelessness (Licentiousness)**, it describes not only immorality; it describes those who are lost to shame. Most people seek to conceal their evil deeds, but people in whose hearts there is shamelessness are long past that. They do not care how much of a public exhibition they make of themselves; they do not care what people think of them. These are the people of those who dare publicly to do the things which are unbecoming for anyone to do.
There is **contention (Quarreling),** it is the spirit that is born of uncontrolled and unholy competition. It comes from the desire for place, power, and prestige, and from the hatred of being bettered.
It is essentially the sin which places self in the foreground and is the entire denial of Christian love.

Lastly there is **envy (Jealousy)**, it can describe the noble attempt to emulate by those who, when confronted with greatness of character, wish to attain to it. It describes the spirit which cannot be content with what it has and looks with a jealous eye on every blessing given to someone else and denied to itself. Paul's challenge to us to see quarreling as equivalent with abuse of alcohol and sex may bring many of us coming up short. When how we act toward one another is seen not only by God but by those outside the church, our goal of building up the body of Christ on earth is damaged.

PRAYER:
Blessed Savior, at this hour you hung upon the cross, stretching out your loving arms. Grant that all the peoples of the earth may be drawn to your redeeming love, for your Kingdom's sake. AMEN.

BENEDICTION:
In one way, the call to live in love, with our actions revealing that love, remains as urgent as ever, both because we continue to anticipate Christ's return and because we live in a world so full of darkness and brokenness. Unlike Paul, however, we have a great sense of the truth that the Christian life is lived out day to day, with each day presenting challenges and each day building on the one before, as we journey toward being the people God has gifted us to be. GO IN PEACE!