

**Preacher:** Pastor Twyla

**Scripture:** Romans 13:8-14, 1 John 2:15-17

Romans 13:8-14: <sup>8</sup> *Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.* <sup>9</sup> *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.”* <sup>10</sup> *Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.*

<sup>11</sup> *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 now than when we became believers; <sup>12</sup> 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; <sup>13</sup> let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. <sup>14</sup> Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.*

1 John 2:15-17: <sup>15</sup> *Do not love the world or the things in the world. The love of the Father is not in those who love the world; <sup>16</sup> for all that is in the world—the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches—comes not from the Father but from the world. <sup>17</sup> And the world and its desire are passing away, but those who do the will of God live forever.*

The story is told of a woman who had finished shopping and returned to her car. She found four men inside the car. She dropped her shopping bags, drew a handgun, and screamed, “I have a gun, and I know how to use it! Get out of the car.”

Those men did not wait for a second invitation; they got out and ran like crazy. The woman, somewhat shaken, loaded her shopping bags and then got into the car. But no matter how she tried, she could not get her key into the ignition. Then it dawned on her: her car was parked four or five spaces away!

She loaded her grocery bags into her own car and then drove to the police station to turn herself in. The desk sergeant to whom she told the story nearly fell off his chair laughing.

He pointed to the other end of the counter, where four men were reporting a carjacking by an old woman with thick glasses and curly white hair, less than five feet tall, and carrying a large handgun. No charges were filed.

You see, she thought it was her car, but it really belonged to someone else. We think our lives and our finances are our own, but they really belong to God.

Who owns your life? Who owns your finances? Could it be that we may be more willing to look at and welcome the idea of God owning our lives than we may be about God owning our finances? Are we comfortable discussing our financial stewardship? Well, it is that time of year again when we do focus some of our attention on stewardship as we build our budget and plan for the coming year’s programming at HCOB.

The Roman text that was read for you this morning is one that I used just a few weeks ago. As I turned to commentaries in studying the text for that week, I came across an intriguing commentary reflecting on using this text for stewardship; so that is why I am using it again so soon. Today we will focus our thoughts on financial stewardship; and next week we will focus our thoughts on our time and talents stewardship.

Let’s begin with the challenge we find at the beginning of the Romans text we read. Verse eight in the NRSV translation says, “Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for

the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.” It’s always interesting to read other translations of some verses, like this one. The Message interpretation for this verse is “Don’t run up debts, except for the huge debt of love you owe each other. When you love others, you complete what the law has been after all along.” And the NIV translation says, “Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law.”

I suspect there are not many of us who have not experienced indebtedness. Even if all our bills are paid, we owe a debt of gratitude to persons who have given freely of themselves to help us along the journey. Another kind of debt is more familiar, and more burdensome, in our economic society: financial indebtedness.

Financially, most of us owe something to someone, from the mortgage or rent on our homes to the financing of our cars and trucks. Owing on a mortgage or a car or a college loan is not sinful. Sinfulness lies in our attitude and behavior. When we think and act like something or someone is more important than God, we have given ourselves to idolatry. It is not a sin to be in debt, but it is a sin to be bound by something other than God. The Romans text is a wake-up call regarding the debts and burdens that we allow to come between us and God and loving others.

The text from 1 John speaks against allowing ourselves to be bound to the desire for what gives us worldly pleasure. It challenges us to think about worldliness beyond what gives us external pleasure—like stuff we want, the people we hang out with, places we can go, and things we enjoy doing.

My study bible notes make an additional point based on this text, directing us into deeper thought: “Worldliness is also internal because it begins in the heart and is characterized by three attitudes: (1) the lust of the flesh—a preoccupation with gratifying physical desires; (2) the lust of the eyes—craving and accumulating things, bowing to the god of materialism; and (3) the pride of life—obsession with one’s status or importance.

God values self-control, a spirit of generosity, and a commitment to humble service. It is possible to give the impression of avoiding worldly pleasures while still harboring worldly attitudes in one’s heart. It is also possible, like Jesus, to love sinners and spend time with them while maintaining a commitment to the values of God’s kingdom.”

So, what we are bound to is a heart thing. The Christian life is bound, heart, soul and mind to Christ and is lived with the mind of Christ. Christians put mission before money, people before possessions, Christ before credit cards. When the apostle Paul says in verse 8 of Romans 13, “Owe no one anything, except to love one another,” he is calling us all to a higher order of living.

The command to “love your neighbor as yourself” is about having the attitude and living a life of grace that values all human life. Loving our neighbors means it is impossible to treat as objects those whom we see as persons of sacred worth—in other words, seeing people through the eyes of Jesus.

The homeless persons we pass on the streets, the impoverished children through whose neighborhood we drive, the homeless seeking shelter at Reach, those struggling with mental health problems, the victims of war whose faces we see on the news, and victims of natural disasters—all of these are brothers and sisters to whom we owe our love and service.

When we view life with the mind of Christ, consumers like us become stewards, possessions become opportunities, money becomes an instrument of service, and people become our priority.

What owns our allegiance? What takes most of our time and energy? We may spend more than forty hours a week earning a living, or we may have done so before retirement, but

what is our true motivation for earning money? Is lifestyle, income, personal accomplishment, family, or God our driving force?

A lady was standing in front of a casino when she was approached by a desperate looking man, "Please!" the man begged frantically, "Could you possibly spare \$500. My wife is very sick, and I really need the money to take her to the doctor and to buy her the medicine she needs."

The lady looked at him suspiciously and said, "If I give you \$500, how do I know you won't just go into a casino and gamble it all away?"

The man quickly responded, "Oh no, I wouldn't do that! I've got gambling money!"

For Christians, the love of Christ has called us to a life of grace. We respond to that call by reordering our lives. Our priorities change. Through prayer and self-discipline, we strive to move from our human desire to God's desire. We begin this process when we ask ourselves the vital question, "What owns you?"

This is something we should consider when it comes to discerning what we will give to the church. We give because we follow and love Jesus and we want to help build God's kingdom. We don't give because we think we will earn points or because it will earn us stars in a crown granting us a place in heaven. We don't give because we expect something in return.

The story is told of a girl who regretted breaking her engagement and wrote this letter: "Dearest Tommy, No words could ever express the great unhappiness I've felt since breaking our engagement. Please say you'll take me back. No one could ever take your place in my heart, so please forgive me. I love you, I love you, I love you! I love you!

"Yours forever, Marie

"PS: And congratulations on winning the state lottery."

What this woman had to offer Tommy was definitely not love. A Christian's priority to give as we are able because we love God and our Savior Jesus Christ AND we give because we love others and we want them to be blessed through our love—God's love living through us, given to them any way that we can give it.

You may have received, and if not, you will receive a stewardship letter from the chairperson of the property and finance ministry team, Chris Herman, who represents the Leadership team, and is asking you to consider making a pledge of your intention to give to the church. This is offered in order to help them project a budget and to help challenge you to be faithful with your giving.

I encourage you to prayerfully consider making a pledge, asking God for wisdom and guidance for what you are able to pledge. Please do not hear this sermon telling you that the amount you give is evidence of how much you love God and others and that the more you give makes you a better Christian. Instead, remember our motivation to give is our love for God and our neighbors; the more we can give the more we can help share God's love with others through the ministries of HCOB. This is a reminder for us as individuals and for us corporately as the body of Christ. Who or what owns you? What or who motivates you to give of your financial resources to the church? What are your priorities in life?

Remember the words of Paul in Romans 13: "Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law." Amen.