

## Romans: A Solid Foundation for Christian Living

### Message 6: Honoring the Debt of Grace

Text: Romans 1:11-15

This morning I'd like to talk with you about honoring the debt of grace. Most of us, I imagine, either have been in or are presently in debt to someone. You borrow money – from the bank for a house or car, or from family and friends to make it through an emergency. In this case you are obligated to pay back what was borrowed, most of the time with interest. Or you may borrow a tool from a neighbor, obligating you often not only to return the tool, but also the favor. Someone does something nice for us and often we say, "I am indebted to you." And so there are many ways in which we become debtors.

Well, this morning we're going to look at a debt that everyone who has trusted Christ for salvation has, but it is not what you might think. We'll call it the debt of grace, and we learn about it in Romans 1:11-15. Listen to what the Bible says (read).

Here Paul continues introducing his letter to the Roman church, a church that he didn't start nor had he visited. That he had never visited them might have been a concern for the Roman Christians. If the church was started by Jews who had been in Jerusalem during Pentecost, then this would have been one of the oldest churches in the known world. And as more Gentiles became part of the work, given Paul's notoriety as the apostle to the Gentiles, feelings may have been hurt. Paul visits Corinth, Ephesus, Galatia, Colosse, Lystra, Dyrbe, cities large and small, all in his effort to spread the gospel. Yet he had never visited Rome, the political, cultural, and economic capitol of the empire. So, the Roman church may have felt slighted by him.

So in beginning the letter Paul goes to great attention to share how he longed to be with the Romans. Vs. 11: *"I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong..."* Vs. 13: *"I don't want you to be unaware, brothers, that I planned many times to come to you (but have been prevented from doing so until now)." And vs. 15: "That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are at Rome."* He wants them to know that they have always been on his heart, that he had longed to see them and minister with them for some time.

But why? Why did Paul so greatly want to minister in Rome? Look at vs. 14, the key verse of our text: *"I am obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish. That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are at Rome."* Paul says that he has an obligation that draws him to Rome, and everyplace else where the gospel needs to be preached.

The word *obligated* here is often translated *debtor* – one who owes something to another. So Paul seeks the Romans – and he pursues his entire ministry – with a sense of obligation and indebtedness.

But who does Paul owe? God? This is how some people think. The Christian life is lived out from a sense of obligation to God. Jesus died on the cross for your sin. Now you owe it to Him to worship, live right, and serve Him. But that's not Paul's point.

In vs. 5, Paul said, *"We received grace..."* And grace is God's unmerited, undeserved favor. Jesus died for you, bearing your sin on the cross, as a free gift of grace. And the moment you try and pay that back as a debt to God, you in fact reject the grace of God (ex: gift of car and you insist on paying).

Salvation is by grace. Now, as John Piper said once, we do owe God, on account of sin. But that debt is paid in full, once for all, the moment you trust Christ for salvation. You receive His grace. So, while Christians ought to serve the Lord and follow Him, it's not because we owe Him. And in our text, it wasn't because Paul owed Him either.

So who does Paul owe? Look again at vs. 14: *"I am obligated to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish."* "Greeks and non-Greeks" back then was a common way to refer to the entire world. In the Greco-Roman world, they saw people as either Greek – they were like them and knew their culture and language; or non-Greek, barbarians, people of a different language and culture. So Paul says that his debt is owed to people – people like us, people not like us, but people. Paul is indebted to people. He owes his message – the gospel of grace – to everyone who needs grace themselves in their lives.

But why? Why does Paul owe them? They had never done anything for him, or loaned him anything. That's usually how debt is acquired. You do something for me, or I borrow from you, then I am indebted. But that's not the case here.

But there's another way one becomes indebted to another. Jesus said in Luke 12:48 that to whom much is given, much is required. So, let's say that we are deserted on an island, sort of like on LOST. And I stroll over to the other side of the Island, see a rescue boat, with a shore party on the way. I'm saved. But don't I have an obligation now to you, to run and tell you that help is here? Or if we're stranded in a desert, and I see an oasis, don't I have an obligation to call you over so you too can have life-saving refreshment. Of course.

Well this is what happened with Paul. He was lost in his sin, just like the rest of us. But that day on the Damascus road when Jesus found Him, he

found grace. He didn't earn it. He didn't deserve it. Still, God saved him. Now, he says, having received the wonderful grace of God, he is obligated to share the message so that others can have it too.

This is the debt of grace. Not that we owe God, but that, having had our own debt cancelled out by Him, we owe it to others to show how they too may receive His grace. As Christians, you and I are obligated to others to show them the way to God's grace.

So how do we honor this debt? Well, in the text we find two ways that Paul did so, and I believe that each applies to us, here and now.

### **1. Give yourself in service to believers.**

Vs. 11: "*I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong...*" Paul says, "One way that I discharge my debt is by helping to make you strong." He takes the gift God had given him and uses it to build up the Roman Christians. And notice that it wasn't a one-way-street. In vs. 12 Paul says, "*that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith.*"

It's not only the lost who need God's grace. Christians need to be strengthened by the gospel of grace. And so Paul works to build them up, and they give themselves to build him up, so that together they grow and together they serve. Paul is making an investment in the Romans spiritual growth, because he is indebted to them to do so.

And in the same way, we are indebted to one another. Take a look around this room. Everyone you see, you owe. Not because they have done anything for you, though they may have. You owe them because you have received the grace of God. We owe each other our gifts, our love, our ministry, our compassion, our words of encouragement. And it is when we take seriously this debt that we will grow even more into the church God is calling us to be.

### **2. Give yourself to sharing with unbelievers.**

Vs. 13: "*that I might have a harvest among you...*" Paul gave himself to the church, but he also knew that Rome was a center of pagan society. And so he says, when I come, I hope to have a harvest among you. I hope to present the gospel of grace and see many come to faith in Christ. Why? Because he not only owed a debt to the church. He especially owed those who did not know Jesus Christ, who were lost in sin.

This world is getting more lost every day. I read a quote in our prayer service a couple of weeks ago that I believed indicated how bad things were. But just when I think I've read something extreme, something else comes along. Last week the London Times ran a story on doctors in Great Britain who want the

right to kill babies that the doctor at birth believes to be seriously disabled. Doctors have this right in the Netherlands now, and now the British physicians are seeking the same. But that's not what disturbed me. What hit me was this quote by Dr. John Harris, a professor of bioethics at Manchester University. He says, "We can terminate a fetus up to term but cannot kill a newborn. What do people think has happened in the passage down the birth canal to make it okay to kill the fetus at one end of the birth canal but not at the other."

We live in lost world. And politics is not the answer. Certainly ignoring it and hoping it goes away is not the answer. Jesus is the answer. Only the grace of God can change things like this. People say these things because they are lost, and in need of a savior. And if you are a Christian, you have the one truth that will make a difference.

Christians, you owe your children, your family, your neighbors, and even total strangers – people like you and people not-like you – we owe them what God has so graciously shown us.

That's why as a church we given an invitation each week. That's why we invest in things like Jeremiah House, and our missions offerings. It's why we take mission trips. And these things are good, but there is so much more we can do. Because we owe it to them. Give yourself to sharing with unbelievers.

### **Conclusion:**

Receiving the grace of God leaves you obligated to help others find this grace. You honor the debt by giving yourself in service to believers, and by giving yourself in sharing with unbelievers.

So what about you? It could be that God has impressed you about this debt long ago, but you have not really done anything about it...

On the other hand, you could be serving more from indebtedness to God, as opposed to a debt to others. Maybe you need to go back and remember how precious grace is...

Or perhaps, today, you need to experience the grace of God...