

THE DEBT I OWN MY FELLOW CHRISTIAN

By Bill Irby

The concept of debt is familiar to Bible readers. Paul said, "I am debtor both to the Greeks, and to the Barbarians; both to the wise, and to the unwise. So as much as in me is, I am ready to preach the gospel to you that are at Rome also" (Romans 1:14-15). A debt is an obligation, a duty, or what is owed. Paul felt a responsibility to preach the saving gospel of Christ (Romans 1:16) because he had been saved by it himself.

In Romans 8 Paul said, "Therefore, brethren, we are debtors---not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. For if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are the sons of God" (12-14). Christians must decide how they are going to live. They may return to the world and live fleshly, carnal lives. Or they may respond to God and live according to the Holy Spirit. In the first century, the Holy Spirit taught directly, through inspiration and thus, inspired people. Today, he teaches by and through the Word of God (see 2 Timothy 3:15-4:4 and 1 John 4:1).

Thus the child of God is a debtor to live a certain kind of life. God saved us; therefore we must not live carnal, fleshly lives (1 John 2:15-17). Since God's grace has brought us into His family, we owe it to God and each other to live as children of God.

How might we accomplish the good goal of paying this debt we owe God and each other? To begin with, we must understand that this is a debt we can never finish repaying. We don't get to a place in life and then declare, "Well, I've got that paid off." God has done such an incredible thing for us that we could never pay Him back. We simply do not have the currency required to do it. Jesus died for us when He did not have to, but His was the only death capable of redeeming us (Romans 5:6-8). But we do know we owe God, and that obligation extends to our fellow Christians according to the teaching of the Bible.

Going back to the context of Romans 1:14, we see that we are to live righteously. Another way to say it is that we are to live by the gospel of Christ. It is in the gospel that the righteousness of God is revealed (Romans 1:17). Paul continues in this chapter and in those that follow to describe the unrighteousness of all categories of man, finally to conclude that, "...all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (3:23). I owe my brothers and sisters a good life lived before them. No adultery or drinking to be sure...but also no gossip, no murmuring, and no backbiting.

In Matthew 18:21-35 we learn that we are to live forgivingly. Peter wanted to know how many times he should forgive his brother, if perhaps seven times would be adequate. Jesus multiples Peter's answer and then gave the parable of the unforgiving servant. This is the man that was forgiven much but would not forgive others of the little they owed him. In verse 27 we see that compassion leads to forgiveness. Yet too often we refuse to forgive our brothers and sisters. We forget sometimes what has been forgiven us.

In Luke 7:36-50 we learn from God to live lovingly. Jesus was kind to the sinful woman who washed his feet with her tears and anointed him with oil. Some complained that she was not fit to even touch Jesus. The Lord gave another debtor parable that taught that those who are forgiven a great debt love the one forgiving a great deal. This woman might have been scorned and spurned. Too often we are harsh and judgmental of others. This occurs when we forget that we are to love one another. Do we demand perfection in others that we know can never exist in ourselves?

What do we owe each other? Well, perhaps it is best summed up in the idea of Matthew 7:12, the Golden Rule. Those who demand of others that which they cannot themselves supply is doomed to Hell. Rather let us strive to live righteously, forgivingly, and lovingly.