

MATTERS OF LIFE AND DEBT

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Romans 13:8-14

As most of you know, my father, Robert Edington, died earlier this summer at the age of 90. He hadn't been sick. He just wore out. I would like to take this opportunity to again thank you for your many expressions of love and concern toward my family. It has meant so much to us and helped us through a difficult time.

My father lived 90 years and it was a full and remarkable life. He graduated from high school in Mobile and entered college at age 16. After college, he enrolled in law school but halfway through he joined the navy to serve in Korean War. After Korea, he completed his law degree and returned to Mobile to practice law. He met my mother and they got married. He ran for and won a seat in the Alabama state legislature and served for twelve years. He was always active in his church and taught in an adult Sunday school class for many years. He was active civically and was always involved in some local or statewide project. He led a full life.

When he died, somehow it fell to me to assemble his obituary. And that was a daunting task. I had less than one day to take my father's life and compress it into a few words. What should I include? What should I leave out? Despite all that he did, my father never bragged and he didn't like drawing attention to himself. Obituaries become sort of a semi-official record of a person's life. I had to find the right balance.

Obituary—I love that word. It is a strange word. It sounds so ancient and arcane. It sounds like death. The truth is, it is a fairly new word that came into existence around 1700. It was then that we started having newspapers and these newspapers started printing death reports. These death reports became known as obituaries. It should be no surprise that the word is derived from the Latin word *obituaris* which means "pertaining to death."

Since writing my father's obituary I've given a great deal of thought to my own obituary and my own life. What will be written about me? What sort of life have I led?

Anyone can fill up an obituary with meaningless facts such as "He loved bowling and twice bowled a 300 game." But what if you are only allowed a few words with which to compose an obituary. What words would those be? What are the five words that best describe you? Are there words that you are proud of? words that make you feel ashamed?

Our reading for today is from the thirteenth chapter of the book of Romans. The reading itself does not offer any hints on how to write an obituary. But it does

provide guidance on how we as Christians can lead meaningful lives—lives worthy of an inspirational obituary, the sort of life where the preacher won't have to lie at your funeral.

A preacher friend of mine tells of the time he was invited to participate in a funeral. He was a friend of the family and was asked to say a few words. The man being buried was a less-than-perfect individual but my friend didn't go there. At the funeral, he spoke and sat down. The pastor of the church then got up for his words and he started talking about what a wonderful human being the man had been. He went on and on showering the deceased with praise and accolades until the widow stood up and loudly said to her children, "Come on, kids. I've heard enough of this. We're leaving." And they walked out. True story.

Our reading today is from the book of Romans. Throughout this book, Paul dedicates entire passages teaching the true nature of Christian love. Love is sincere, love hates evil, love clings to what is good, love is patient in suffering, love assists the saints, love provides hospitality for strangers.

Then, after defining love, in our reading for today, Paul offers his guidance on how all believers are to live in the faith—with lives bounded by love.

The first thing he says is that we should not live in debt. In the Roman economy, debt was complicated. It was an economy based on obligation—slaves were obligated to their masters, workers to their employers, and everyone to the empire. When in debt, you belong to someone else, you are obligated to them. Our reading begins with Paul saying, *Owe no one anything, except to love one another*. Paul is saying that to live in Christ one must be free of any distracting obligations to others. Our chief obligation should be to Christ. The only debt we should carry should be love. When we love one another with Christian love then we have fulfilled God's commands.

So, what are God's commands? The Old Testament contains over six-hundred individual rules and statutes. Principle among these are, of course, the Ten Commandments. Paul lists four of the Commandments in our reading. These are the "shall nots" of the Ten Commandments—you shall not commit adultery, murder, steal, or covet. It is crucial to note that each of these "shall nots" is rooted in love. Love determines whether or not we will commit adultery or kill someone or steal from someone or covet someone's life. These commandments, Paul explains, can be summed up with the single command, *Love your neighbor as yourself*. Throughout our Bible, all the rules and statutes and commands can be boiled down to that simple command, *Love your neighbor as yourself*. Love, Paul says, *fulfills the law*. Love fulfills God.

When your obituary is written, if you want to highlight how much money you accumulated, or how many businesses you started, or the famous people you rubbed

elbows with, or how many bowling trophies you accumulated, that is fine. But as Christians, we should want our obituary to say that, above all, we loved all people.

Paul's message to the Romans is nothing less than a call to action, to do something. Wake up, he says, salvation is closer now than ever before. The night of sin is going away; the day of salvation is near.

Paul's directive at this point is to decide how you want your obituary to read. Do you want it to say that your life was marked by your *reveling and drunkenness*, your *debauchery and licentiousness*, your *quarreling and jealousy*? Is this how you want to be remembered? Paul calls these things *the works of darkness*. Are these the things that define us?

Instead, Paul urges his readers to get dressed with a different outfit. Put on, he says, the *armor of light* because that is the clothing of salvation. *Put on the armor of light and live honorably*. And what is the armor of light? How do we wear this? It is nothing less than Jesus Christ. Wear Christ like you wear a new outfit. Let his life cover you and embrace you. Let his words define who you are. When the world looks at you, what they should see is Jesus Christ; what they should see is love.

This is the obituary that we should be writing about ourselves—that we are filled with love for all people and when the world looks at us, it sees Jesus. For a Christian, that is the perfect obituary.

And Paul should know better than anyone. He knows what it is like to *put on the armor of light*, to wear the garment of Christ. He went from persecuting those who followed Jesus to being one of the greatest advocates of the church. After embraced Christ, he redirected his life to become a missionary—teaching the gospel, sharing the message, and collecting donations for the poor. No longer was he in debt to his old life, but lived in the freedom of Christ. He understood how to love as Christ loved.

Finally, Paul points out that there is an urgency to his words. We can't wait to put on Christ when we can “get around to it.” It is something to be done now. The time is upon us. As we read today, now is the moment for you to wake from sleep. The age is coming to an end. The kingdom is near. The window of salvation won't be open forever. Now is the time to decide who you want to be. It is a matter of life and debt.