

Intro: Illust: Not wanting to get involved...

Did you realize that debt, in at least one sense, is good. There is a right kind of debt. I am not talking about financial debt. I have in mind a powerful statement the apostle Paul once made. These were his words, "I am debtor." Paul's indebtedness shaped his life.

What did he mean? What is the right kind of debt? What is the debt we must never pay off? What will happen if we accept the right kind of debt? To answer these questions, we must turn to Romans 1.

This morning we are going to examine Paul's reflections in verses 8-15. Remember, he is writing this letter to Christians in Rome, many of whom he had never met. To prepare them for a visit he hoped to make soon, he wrote Romans. Critics of the gospel had circulated false information about the apostle. So Paul sent this epistle to help the Romans get to know the real Paul.

What made Paul tick? Who was he really? The answer to that, and the key phrase of our study is tucked away in v 14, "I am debtor." The NASB reads, "I am under obligation." The NIV states, "I am obligated."

To whom was Paul indebted? Obviously, to Christ, to the One who had saved his life. Yet his obligation had another focus. He was indebted, for the sake of the gospel, to people. Listen carefully to the Phillips Modern English reading of v 14, "I feel myself under a sort of universal obligation, I owe something to all men, from cultured Greek to ignorant savage." I owe something to all men.

Those are strange words to us, aren't they? I owe something to all men. Having come through the "Me decade" of the 1980's, our American motto is, "I expect something from all men." The world owes me.

Take, for instance, the common slogan, "America First." Is that a biblical statement? Is it a statement that ought to flow from the lips of followers of Christ? Do we have a responsibility to the world? Should it matter to us what is happening in Rwanda and Bosnia? If so, what is our obligation?

I fear that we have, to a great degree, lost the sense of "indebtedness" that Paul had. I am asking God to use this study to help us recapture the significance of those words, "I am debtor." That God will transform us into "global" Christians.

What will happen to us if we acknowledge that we are debtors to the gospel? The results will be lifechanging.

Proposition: According to Paul's testimony in Romans 1:8-15, being a debtor exerts three practical influences on our lives.

I. Being a debtor influences the way I Pray (8-10).

His prayer was marked by:

A. Thankfulness (8)

B. Consistency (9)

C. Clarity (9-10)

1. Specific people (9)

- 2. Specific request (10)
- II. Being a debtor influences the way I Plan (11-13).
 - In his planning, Paul was influenced by these priorities:
 - A. Priority: People (11)
 - B. Priority: Faith (12)
 - 1. Theirs
 - 2. His own
 - C. Priority: Fruit (13)
- III. Being a debtor influences the way I Preach (14-15).
 - His preaching was shaped by:
 - A. His view of himself
 - B. His view of others

I. Being a debtor influences the way I Pray (8-10).

READ vv 8-10

Whenever I read Paul's letters, I am convicted by his prayer life. Here is a man who knew how to pray, and prayed. Prayer was a priority to him. Being a debtor influenced the way he prayed.

His prayer for the Romans was marked by three characteristics.

A. Thankfulness (8)

V 8 "First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you." Notice he expressed thanks to God, through Christ, for the Roman Christians, because of their faith. It's no wonder that a man indebted to the gospel was thankful for the churches in Rome.

Rome was the capital of perhaps the greatest empire this world has ever known. All roads led to Rome. What thrilled Paul was this. Not that the church was without problems (see 2:1). But that the faith of the Romans was spoken of around the world.

Paul didn't take this for granted. He thanked God for it. The fact that he didn't start the church in Rome didn't matter. What mattered was that the gospel of Christ was advancing. It had reached Rome. And Rome was a strategic location from which to launch into yet unreached lands, like Spain.

Sidelight: Paul appreciated each of the churches to which he ministered. Yet they were different. Churches are not clones. Churches have different personalities and different potential. The church in Rome was different from the one in Jerusalem or in Ephesus.

Every once in awhile a statement will pop up like, "How come your church doesn't do what Charles Stanley's church does?" Or, "Why don't you do it the way Willow Creek does it?" Or, "I used to go to such and such church, and they did this. Why don't we?"

Churches, like people, are different. Each has a unique location, a unique set of people, a unique opportunity for the advancement of the gospel. Thank God for it.

A second characteristic marked Paul's prayer. Thankfulness, and...

B. Consistency (9)

V 9 "For God is my witness...that without ceasing I make mention of you." Those words jump off the page: "without ceasing," and "always." Paul's praying was marked by consistency.

What kept him consistent in his prayer life? He saw his praying as a vital part of his serving. Listen again to v 9, "whom I serve...I make mention of you." Prayer was not a warm-up for ministry. Prayer was ministry! Prayer was vital to the progress of the gospel of Christ. Because Paul knew that, he prayed with consistency.

C. Clarity (9-10)

What do I mean by clarity? This. Paul didn't pray in abstract, general, vague terms. He prayed in specifics. In two areas here...

1. He prayed for specific people (9).

V 9 "I make mention of YOU." Who were they? Check out Romans 16 later, and you'll see that Paul had real people in mind. People like Priscilla and Aquila, Epaenetus, Mary, Andronicus, Junias, Ampliatus, Urbanus, Stachys, and others.

2. He prayed a specific request (10).

What was Paul's request? V 10 "Making request, that if by any means now at length I might have a prosperous journey by the will of God to come unto you." Paul wanted to visit the Christians in Rome. That's a specific desire. So he prayed a specific request.

Did God answer Paul's request? Yes, but not quite as Paul planned. Paul made it to Rome, about 4 years later(?). Do you remember the circumstances? After he wrote Romans (in Corinth), he took a gift to the church in Jerusalem. There, he was arrested by the Romans, and finally ended up in Rome. In chains. God always answers prayer, but not always in the way we anticipated!

Paul's prayer was marked by thankfulness, consistency, and clarity. And the reason he prayed was this. He was a debtor. Being a debtor influences the way I pray.

Do you pray? If we struggle in your prayer life, maybe it's because we don't think about our indebtedness enough.

Tran: There's the first practical. Being a debtor influences the way I pray.

II. Being a debtor influences the way I Plan (11-13).

READ vv 11-13 (pay special attention to Paul's plan)

What was Paul's plan? Simply put, he wanted to go to Rome. Why? To go sightseeing? A vacation? To see the gladiators in the Colosseum? No. Paul had ministry in mind. His plans were influenced by his indebtedness to the gospel.

He wanted to engage in spiritual ministry to benefit the Roman Christians (11). He wanted to make sure their doctrine was sound (that's why he wrote this epistle). And another reason, an evangelistic reason.

Here's what Paul wrote later (15:20-24), "Yea, so have I strived to preach the gospel not where Christ was named, lest I should build upon another man's foundation." Paul was running out of territory to preach. So to what unreached land

did he intend to go next? "But now, having no more place in these parts, and having a great desire these many years to come unto you, whenever I take my journey into Spain, I will come to you." Paul had his eye on Spain. And Rome would be a nice stopping point, on the way to Spain.

Being a debtor influenced the way Paul planned. What priorities influenced Paul in his planning?

A. Priority: People (11)

V 11 "For I long to see YOU, that I may impart unto YOU some spiritual gift, to the end that YE may be established." Notice the intense language. Paul "longed" to see the Christians in Rome. He longed to be a tool in the hand of God to nurture their spiritual growth. He longed to give them a "spiritual gift," a term which in ch 12 refers to specific grace gifts for service. Here Paul uses the term generally (lit. "charisma" = a gift of grace), "I long to give you a spiritual blessing, so you will stand firm in Christ."

What are the things you "long" for? When Paul planned, he was influenced by the priority of people. People mattered to him. People were important to him. Do you know why? Because to a person who is indebted to the gospel, people are priority.

A second priority that influenced the apostle's planning appears in v 12.

B. Priority: Faith (12)

Don't get the idea that ministry is a one way street. Notice Paul's admission, "That is, that I may be comforted TOGETHER with you by the MUTUAL faith both of you and me." Priority #2 was faith, mutual faith. The reason Paul planned to go to Rome was "faith." Whose faith? "by the mutual faith both of you and me."

1. Theirs

Paul's not talking about saving faith here. Remember, he's writing to Christians. Yet we never arrive, this side of glory. Paul wanted to see the faith of the Romans grow. His aim was to be a part of that growth.

But Paul was no egotist, and certainly no superspiritual braggert. True, they needed him, but he needed them, too. A trip to Rome would reinforce his own faith.

2. His own

Notice those words, "Both of you AND ME." You say, "Paul was an apostle. He had seen the Lord. How could the young Christians in Rome help his faith? Over 400 years ago, Jean Calvin made this comment about Paul, "Note how modestly he expresses what he feels by not refusing to seek strengthening from inexperienced beginners. He means what he says, too, for there is none so void of gifts in the Church of Christ who cannot in some measure contribute to our spiritual progress (Cranfield, 15)." There are to be no Lone Rangers in the kingdom. We need each other.

There is a third area of priority that influenced Paul's planning. People, faith...

C. Priority: Fruit (13)

V 13 "Now I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, that oftentimes I purposed to come unto you." Notice the planning. Why did Paul want to go? "That I might have some FRUIT among you." Paul was after fruit.

What did he mean by fruit? Notice the next phrase, "even as among other Gentiles." There's the clue. What happened in Paul's previous ministries with Gentile people? What happened in Ephesus and Antioch and Thessalonica? In those places, fruit involved seeing people repent and be saved. Fruit involved seeing people disciplined. Fruit involved seeing people grow to be more like Christ. That's what Paul longed to see happen in Rome, too.

Let these 3 priorities sink in. When Paul planned, his decisions were influenced by people, faith, and fruit. The fact that he was a debtor influenced his plans.

How do you plan? There's no question that we are living in a "think of yourself" age. The "me first" mentality permeates our society. It affects the way we "do church," counseling, the way young people choose their occupations, the way older people make decisions for job transfers. "What's in it for ME?!"

That's what makes Paul so striking. He was indebted, for the gospel's sake, to others. What mattered to him were people, faith, and fruit.

Does Christ affect your plans? Do you think of Christ when you decide what you are going to do with that unexpected inheritance check you got in the mail? Do you have a passion to use everything you have to honor Christ?

Tran: Being a debtor to the gospel influences the way I pray, plan, and thirdly...

III. Being a debtor influences the way I Preach (14-15).

READ vv 14-15 "I am debtor..."

Key: I am convinced that Paul never got over what Christ had done for him. I know that because of what he wrote to a friend, "I thank Christ Jesus, our Lord, who has enabled me, in that He counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry, who was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious; but I obtained mercy." That's what Paul shared with Timothy (I Tim 1:12-13).

Being a debtor influenced the way Paul preached. His preaching was shaped by:

A. His view of himself

Last week, while sitting on the bleachers at Katie's gymnastics recital rehearsal, Sherry nudged me and said, "Did you see that shirt?" I hadn't, and looked at a girl who was about 8 years old. She was wearing a t-shirt with this message on it, "If I can't win, I don't want to play."

What's the right way for a Christian to view himself or herself? Listen to Paul's view of himself, in v 14, "I am debtor." Paul was a debtor, for the gospel's sake, to people.

Why did Paul call himself a debtor? Because he saw himself as a servant (1). He knew he belonged to Christ. And Christ had entrusted the gospel to his care. The same goes for us. As Christians, we hold the gospel. Put bluntly, we are not to hoard that which we hold.

His preaching affected his view of himself, and also...

B. His view of others

Notice the groups to which Paul said he was indebted. "To Greeks (i.e. those from the Graeco-Roman culture), and to barbarians (i.e. Gentiles who didn't speak Greek; who say "bar bar"; despised by the Romans; those in Spain?); both to the wise and to the unwise."

Because he was a debtor, Paul felt an obligation to ALL men. Not just to people who talked like he did, or lived like he did, or were educated like he was, but also to people who were very different. You see, the gospel cuts across social barriers, and educational barriers, and economic barriers, and ethnic barriers. All need Christ.

We need to wake up to this truth in the church today! The world doesn't have a clue how to reconcile the tensions between people groups. But we have the answer. In Christ, we are one. And when we see ourselves as debtors, we'll never view others the same way again.

When I see myself as a debtor, it affects the way I preach. My aim in life is to preach Christ. It's my duty, my obligation, my passion in life.

Conclusion:

Are you a debtor to Christ? Is it evident in your life? The fact that Paul was a debtor influenced the way he prayed, planned, and preached. How about you?

Where is your focus in life? On Christ, or on yourself? If you say your focus is on Christ, is there any evidence of that in your life? If you say you are indebted to Christ, what have you done recently to verify that?

How much time did you spend praying for OTHERS this past week? Do your plans reflect Christ? Is it a priority in your life to see Christ preached among the nations?

Specific Challenge: I challenge you to do two things today, and you will have a good idea where your priorities are.

First, get out your checkbook. Where did you spend your money last year? How much did you spend on your family vacation? How much did you give to support the work of Christ? How much went to personal pleasure, and how much went to world missions? That's pretty revealing, isn't it?

Second, get out your calendar. Look at your appointments for the past month. Where did you spend your time? How much time did you devote to your hobby? How many times did you intentionally share Christ with someone? How many hours did you spend trying to reach your unsaved neighbor?

After looking at your checkbook and calendar, ask yourself, "Am I really a debtor to Christ?"

Suppose you were arrested today and brought to a court of law. This charge was leveled at you, "This person is a debtor to Christ." Suppose the judge got out your checkbook and your calendar, to assess your case, to see whether the charge is true. Are you a debtor to Christ? Would there be enough evidence to convict you?