

# Love and Freedom

## OBLIGATION AND LOVE

God's love, seen in the blazing light of the cross of Christ, is full and overflowing, intimate, self-giving, vulnerable, liberating, and empowering. Our guilt is taken away, and our sin forgiven. We are children of God, and fellow-heirs with Christ, loved by the Father no less than the beloved Son. To be loved like that, and to be in that love towards others, is to live in great freedom.

Yet, as we have seen, the pressure to return to some kind of bondage is very strong. This pressure comes from any sense of unresolved guilt—real or imagined—that places us under some kind of obligation. We find it difficult to believe that such love can come freely without some strings attached. We find ourselves putting conditions, limits and control levers on our own loving. Can we know the full freedom of the love of God in our lives, or must we always be bound by some sense of obligation?

In Romans 13:8, the apostle Paul makes a powerful statement:

Owe no one anything, except to love one another . . .

The Greek word 'owe' (ὀφείλετε, *opheilete*) means, literally, 'be in debt to', but also 'be under an obligation to', and

so ‘have a duty towards’.<sup>1</sup> At first sight, the statement may appear to contradict itself, as if to say: ‘Owe *no one anything*—except to *love* one another—which is *everything*’! It may have something of that force.

Commentators are divided on the meaning of the word ‘except’ (εἰ μὴ, *ei mē*), as to whether it relates the owing to the loving in some way, or opposes them to each other. Is love something that we owe to each other, or is it, in contrast to owing, something that we simply give freely, without obligation?

The most common interpretation is that ‘to love one another’ is the ultimate form of obligation that far surpasses all others. Attention is drawn to the previous verse, where Paul has said, ‘Pay to all what is due [τὰς ὀφειλάς, *tas ophailas*]’. So, ‘Owe no one anything’ means have no outstanding debts. But, it is said, Paul then goes on to imply that there is one debt that can never be repaid, and is always outstanding—the debt of love towards others. Origen (c. 185–254 AD) is commonly cited:

The debt of charity is permanent, and we are never quit of it; for we must pay it daily and yet always owe it.<sup>2</sup>

To speak of love in terms of debt, even inexhaustible debt, may be an interesting way of playing with words, but a certain heaviness can descend on our spirits when love is spoken of in this way. While our fleshly selves may welcome the opportunity to rise to such a challenge, yet at the same time we sense within ourselves a dull despair that we could never fully bear such a burden.

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<sup>1</sup> See Matthew Black, *Romans*, New Century Bible Commentary, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1981, p. 161.

<sup>2</sup> C. H. Dodd, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, Collins, Fontana Books, London, 1959, p. 212.

C. K. Barrett in his translation uses an adversative ‘but’ to make a contrast between owing and loving: ‘Owe no man anything, but you ought to love one another’. This is strongly argued against on the grounds of textual detail by C. E. B. Cranfield;<sup>3</sup> though James Dunn doubts ‘whether Paul formulated the phrase with such precision in mind’.<sup>4</sup> John Murray translates it: ‘Owe no man anything; only do love one another’, in a way that does ‘not state an express exception to what precedes but only another consideration or reservation relevant to what has been stated’. In this, he says, *contra* Origen, ‘love is not regarded as a debt unpaid, nor is there any reflection upon the inexhaustible debt which love involves’, though he does say, ‘the apostle is simply reminding us of what we owe in the matter of love’, and ‘love is a perpetual obligation’.<sup>5</sup>

Others see the two—owing and loving—as juxtaposed or thrown together by Paul to make a telling point. James Dunn, backed up by Matthew Black’s research into Aramaic equivalents, observes: ‘the exhortation has the force of an epigram (with an epigram’s formal ambiguity)’.<sup>6</sup> This at least does not try to say that love and obligation are the same thing.

Could it be that Paul is contrasting obligation and love, and is saying that the believer in Christ is no longer subject to the normal human expectations of tit-for-tat obligation, but is made for a love that is on an altogether different plane? Could it be that Paul knows of a love that leaves all of those human considerations for dead, and goes way beyond

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<sup>3</sup> C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 2, T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1979, pp. 674f.

<sup>4</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9–16*, WBC 38B, Word Books, Dallas, 1988, p. 776.

<sup>5</sup> John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes*, NICOTNT, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1977, vol. 2, p. 159.

<sup>6</sup> Dunn, *Romans 9–16*, p. 776, and Black, *Romans*, p. 162.

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them into something of a different order that is much more wonderful, and yet at the same time very homely and natural: 'No longer be bound and constricted by the ties of mutual obligation; do something much better and more free than that: simply love one another'!

If that is so, then a 'love' that still depends on any sense of obligation for its force and validity is not the love of which he speaks here.

### **A FATHER, AND A FAMILY**

If this is what Paul is saying, then he would be taking after his master Jesus, who said:

When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous (Luke 14:12–14).

Thus Jesus broke through the endless cycles and rituals of mutual obligation with something far richer, more generous, and of a much larger (eternal!) dimension.

This is not a love that arises from human arrangements. It has another source:

If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful (Luke 6:32–36).

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God is under obligation to no one; He just loves, and gives:

... he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else (Acts 17:25, TNIV).

This love Paul has already spoken of earlier in his letter to the Romans: ‘God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us’ (Rom. 5:5). This love is nothing other than the love God has for us ‘in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us’ (Rom. 5:8). As the apostle John wrote:

In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice [propitiation]<sup>7</sup> for our sins (1 John 4:10).

It is with this ‘great love with which he loved us’ (Eph. 2:4)—that we are now in the reality and full flow of—that we are to love one another. As we love one another in this love:

... God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us (1 John 4:12).

As we love one another in this way, God’s active, practical love reaches its goal—comes into its own—in us!

### **LOVE AND CULTURAL CONSTRAINT**

Very different from this is what passes for ‘love’ or relationship in most human societies. We may be aware of the often unspoken but nonetheless potent expectations and conventions

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<sup>7</sup> See Leon Morris’s classic treatment of ‘Propitiation’ in *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Third Edition 1965), pp. 146–213, where he established that the Greek word here has to do with ‘the turning away of wrath’ (p. 178).

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that go with relationships in various cultures.<sup>8</sup> We may not be so willing to recognise in our own culture the elements of ‘you owe me’. There is a hold that those in relationship with us can have over us, which we may seek to pay off in order to free ourselves from the obligation.

Underlying this is a preferred sense of being separate and independent from the other person in some measure—to be our own person. This is the way of the world, as conditioned by human sin. Emil Brunner, in his commentary on Romans 13:8, calls it the way of justice:

To owe no one anything—that is the principle of justice. ‘To everyone his own’ . . . Yet this ‘owing no one anything’ is not separate and independent, but is embedded in something still greater. Whoever owes nothing to anyone parts from the other once he has done his duty.

To this Brunner contrasts the way of love:

Love is greater than justice; it does more than justice demands. The demand of justice ends with the individual; love alone is all-embracing because it does not keep its eye on ‘something’ that one owes the other but on the other himself and myself. I owe myself to him and therefore I am never done with him.<sup>9</sup>

Love is not some ‘thing’ that we owe each other. It is we giving our very selves to another. The Macedonian believers were keen to participate in the collection of money for the

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<sup>8</sup> A person known to me was organising an international arts festival, and was welcoming a troupe of performers from a South-East Asian country. They presented him with a gift for himself, and then with one for his wife. When he, with typical Australian deprecation, said, ‘Oh, you don’t need to do that’, they became fiercely insistent: ‘No, no! You must take it! You must take it!’ Clearly they felt themselves to be under some kind of obligation to him, which they would remain under until the gift was accepted.

<sup>9</sup> Emil Brunner, *The Letter to the Romans: A Commentary*, Lutterworth Press, London, 1959, p. 111.

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relief of their fellow-believers in need. But in their case it was not just a giving of some ‘thing’:

... and this, not merely as we expected; they gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us (2 Cor. 8:5).

Paul was prepared to talk of relationships in terms of ‘owing’ in this sense of giving himself to others to bring them into gospel freedom and love:

I am a debtor [ὀφειλέτης: *opheiletēs*] both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish—hence my eagerness to proclaim the gospel to you also who are in Rome (Rom. 1:14–15).

This is entirely a matter of gospel-love, constrained by ‘the love of Christ’, which reaches to all in that ‘one has died for all’ (2 Cor. 5:14).

### **LOVE AND THE LAW OF GOD**

One of the most deadly ways human obligation can manifest itself in relationships is through the misuse of the law of God. The fact that it is the law of God does not safeguard us from this misuse—it only makes the effects of it more perilous. People and their impositions can be resisted, but to put the law of God on a person as a heavy thing is almost unanswerable. This is a difficulty Jesus had with the law-abiding scribes and Pharisees of his day:

They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them . . . Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cross sea and land to make a single convert, and you make the new convert twice as much a child of hell as yourselves (Matt. 23:4, 15).

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Paul took no less exception to the actions of the Judaisers in Galatia, who sought to impose the religious practice of circumcision on Gentile believers. No doubt they thought they were being uncompromising in their adherence to the law of God, and in bringing others to belong to God in this way. No doubt the new converts who heroically submitted to this painful procedure thought they were going the whole way in radical discipleship. Paul saw through all this to an underlying insecurity that, in not embracing the total freedom from guilt brought in the cross of Christ, felt that it needed to secure itself by 'doing the right thing', and getting others with them onto the same bandwagon:

It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh that try to compel you to be circumcised—only that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. Even the circumcised do not themselves obey the law, but they want you to be circumcised so that they may boast about your flesh. May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything! (Gal. 6:12–15).

We see how Paul comes back again to the action of the cross, which has brought us into a whole new reality.

For this reason Paul was keen to show, in Romans 13, that the love of which he spoke more than fulfilled the law of God, and was indeed the very heart of it:

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. 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.' Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law (Rom. 13:8–10).

Dunn describes this love:



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... a realistic and active love which seeks the good of the other without necessarily being bound by convention meets the requirements of God's law more than a love constrained by legal precedent and conditional on acceptance of ethnically limiting customs and rituals.<sup>10</sup>

Paul is not just saying, 'See—we Christians keep the law too'; nor is he reverting to any law-based justification. He has moved from that to a Christ-forged relationship with God who Himself is love. Brunner aptly comments:

God's commandments, rightly understood, always declare one thing only: love your neighbour . . . In the commandment of love the whole law is summed up; yet the commandment of love can be neither correctly understood nor rightly fulfilled as law. To fulfil it we must have love, of course, but we cannot bestow this love upon ourselves! It is the nature of love that it must 'flow' freely, as Luther said. That which springs from one's own effort is certainly not love. Love is either present, because 'it has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit' after we have been united with God by faith in the reconciliation through Jesus Christ—or it is not present at all. But if it is present, then it fulfils all that the law demands. It is pure good-will towards the other, and therefore does only good, and not evil. That this love is now present, so that one only needs to remember it, is the gift of God in Jesus Christ, the fruit of faith 'which is working through love' (Gal. 5:6).<sup>11</sup>

Of course! We cannot love unless love has been given to us. Once it is given—we love!

Can we begin to see what this loving would be like in practice, particularly in relation to obligation and freedom?

### **PAUL THE FREE MAN**

Paul displayed a remarkable freedom, and also commitment, in his relationships with others. Firstly, he was not constrained

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<sup>10</sup> Dunn, *Romans 9–15*, p. 783.

<sup>11</sup> Brunner, *Romans*, p. 112.

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by what anyone else thought of him. Since, through the justification that is in Christ Jesus, he had ‘praise . . . from God’ (Rom. 2:29), and ‘God’s approval’, now ‘pleasing people’ or ‘seeking human approval’ had no place in his life as a servant of Christ (see Gal. 1:10; compare John 5:44; 12:43). This made him proof against any judgements others might pass upon him, or even that he might pass upon himself:

. . . with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. I do not even judge myself. I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me (1 Cor. 4:3–4).

So also Paul’s ministry of the gospel had no eye on what people might think of him. It was never Paul’s intention that he should ‘lord it’ over anyone’s faith (2 Cor. 1:24), and he refused to bring any improper pressure to bear on others:

. . . we refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God’s word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God . . . For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus’ sake (2 Cor. 4:2, 5).

Did I take advantage of you through any of those whom I sent to you? . . . Titus did not take advantage of you, did he? Did we not conduct ourselves with the same spirit? (2 Cor. 12:17, 18).

In this freedom of the love of God, Paul made himself available widely towards others:

For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law) so that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became

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weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some (1 Cor. 9:19–22).

Paul's capacity to love was without limitation, even towards those who did him despite, and even when this made him appear weak in the eyes of others (as in 2 Cor. 10:10, where there were those who said: 'his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible'). Even to these, Paul said:

. . . our heart is wide open to you. There is no restriction in our affections . . . you are in our hearts, to die together and to live together (2 Cor. 6:11–12; 7:3).

There cannot be a greater identification in love than that.

Paul's exercise of leadership was especially instructive. Paul was clear on his authority as an apostle, and expected this to be plainly acknowledged by others:

Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not my work in the Lord? If I am not an apostle to others, at least I am to you; for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord (1 Cor. 9:1–2).

The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, signs and wonders and mighty works (2 Cor. 12:12).

Surely we do not need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you or from you, do we? You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all; and you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts (2 Cor. 3:1–3).

We see here that Paul looked for that acknowledgement to come, not via any 'official' channels, but in the context of personal relationships. In this, Paul was also clear that his apostleship was not dependent on any human arrangement or endorsement, but came from Christ himself:

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Paul an apostle—sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead . . . For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ (Gal. 1:1, 11–12).

Paul did not refrain from exercising this spiritual authority when he needed to for the good of the church and its members, even from a distance:

For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present I have already pronounced judgment in the name of the Lord Jesus on the man who has done such a thing. When you are assembled, and my spirit is present with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord (1 Cor. 5:3–5).

Anyone who claims to be a prophet, or to have spiritual powers, must acknowledge that what I am writing to you is a command of the Lord. Anyone who does not recognize this is not to be recognized (1 Cor. 14:37–38).

Even so, there were times when Paul refrained from wielding this authority, in the interests of operating out of love. Paul insisted on the right of an apostle to be materially supported by those he served. But, in the case of the Corinthians, he made no claim to this right:

But I have made no use of any of these rights, nor am I writing this so that they may be applied in my case . . . What then is my reward? Just this: that in my proclamation I may make the gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my rights in the gospel (1 Cor. 9:15, 18).

Did I commit a sin by humbling myself so that you might be exalted, because I proclaimed God's good news to you free of charge? I robbed other churches by accepting support from them in order to serve you. And when I was with you and was in need, I did not burden anyone, for my needs were supplied by the friends who came

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from Macedonia. So I refrained and will continue to refrain from burdening you in any way. As the truth of Christ is in me, this boast of mine will not be silenced in the regions of Achaia. And why? Because I do not love you? God knows I do! (2 Cor. 11:7–11).

This practice of Paul was in contrast to some who used what spiritual authority they had to demean and control others who, for some reason, readily submitted to such abuse:

For you put up with it when someone makes slaves of you, or preys upon you, or takes advantage of you, or puts on airs, or gives you a slap in the face (2 Cor. 11:20).

Paul saw the faith of others as something over which he had no right of control:

I do not mean to imply that we lord it over your faith; rather, we are workers with you for your joy, because you stand firm in the faith (2 Cor. 1:24).

Rather, as we shall see, he rejoiced to stand respectfully alongside them, before their one Lord.

### *Questions for Reflection or Discussion*

- *What have we known of a 'love' that comes with implicit obligations?*
- *What have we known of a love that has been given freely and simply?*
- *What have we known of the law of God imposed as 'heavy burdens, hard to bear'?*
- *When has the law of God been our delight, and what has made it so?*
- *What constituted Paul's freedom, in ministry and in leadership? What kept him from imposing either in a controlling way as a bondage on others?*