

Pay your debts

A sermon preached at Poplar Baptist Church,

14th July 2019

“Let no debt remain outstanding” (Romans 13.8)

Introduction

This morning I want to focus our attention on the beginning of verse 8 of Romans 13, which says, according to our translation, “Let no debt remain outstanding”. The literal translation is “Owe no one anything”.

This is a verse which is not easy to interpret. Some have taken it as a blanket prohibition on a Christian borrowing at all, under any circumstances. They have said, on the basis of this verse, that no Christian should ever take out a loan, and that no Christian should ever have a mortgage. Others have gone to the other extreme and have said that all this verse is talking about is making prompt repayments of loans, and that a Christian should feel free to take out a loan for any and every reason.

So what I intend to do this morning is to deal with this verse by asking, and answering, a series of questions, such as.

- Is it sinful for a Christian to borrow money at all?
- Is it sinful for a Christian to borrow at interest?
- If it is not always sinful for a Christian to borrow money, are there times when it would be sinful, or at least unwise, for a Christian to borrow money?
- How can we overcome the temptation to take out foolish or sinful loans?

- What should we do if we are in debt?

I need hardly say how important it is that we have clarity on the subject of handling money and debt. Many in our society are very deeply in debt, causing huge amounts of stress and difficulty. Some have run up debts that are so large that the interest payments alone are larger than their incomes, and they have no chance of ever repaying the principal. Debt can lead to terrible poverty as the person in debt can find that there is just not enough money each month for basic necessities. Debt can lead to terrible stresses within marriages, leading to arguments and sometimes marriage breakdowns. It is not uncommon for debt to lead people to despair and even suicide.

One would like to think that problems with debt are confined to unbelievers, but in my pastoral experience I have known believers also to be very deeply in debt, leading to massive complications in their lives.

So then, let us think about how we are to answer the questions that I raised, in the light of Scripture as a whole. As we do so, we need to bear in mind an important principle of Scriptural interpretation, which is that any view that we think we have derived from Scripture needs to be interpreted in the light of the teaching of Scripture in general.

1. Is it sinful for a Christian to borrow money?

The answer to this question must be "no", for the simple reason that the Scriptures commend those who lend generously. If borrowing were a sin, then lending would also be a sin, as lending would encourage the person who was borrowing to "sin" by borrowing.

In many places Scripture commends the person who lends to the poor. Psalm 37 verses 25 and 26 says, "I was young and now I am old, yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread. They are always generous and lend freely; their children will be blessed."

Jesus says, as recorded in Luke 6 verses 30 to 34,

Give to everyone who asks of you, and whoever takes away what is yours, do not demand it back. Treat others the same way you want them to treat you. 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 expect to receive,

what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners in order to receive back the same amount.

This is in the context of showing love to enemies. Jesus says that we should love our enemies by doing good to them, which includes lending to them. We should lend even to people who we are pretty sure will not return what was lent to them.

So in answer to the first question, this verse cannot be teaching that a Christian should never borrow money.

2. Should a Christian never borrow at interest?

“OK,” someone might say, “if it is not sinful to borrow at all, what about borrowing at interest? Does not the Scripture forbid people to lend at interest? If it is forbidden to lend at interest, surely it is forbidden to borrow at interest?”

For many years the Roman Catholic religion taught that it is wrong to lend at interest. Islam also officially teaches that interest should not be paid on loans. If you do a search on the internet you will find that there are certain Christian groups today who also teach that no Christian should ever take out a loan with interest.

In answering this question, we should acknowledge that there are many places in the Old Testament where God’s people were forbidden from charging interest on loans to other Israelites, especially those Israelites who were poor. For example, in Exodus chapter 22 verse 25, it is recorded that God said to Moses that he was to tell the people, “If you lend money to one of my people among you who is needy, do not be like a money-lender; charge him no interest.”

In Leviticus chapter 25 verses 35 to 37, it is recorded that God said to Moses,

If one of your countrymen becomes poor and is unable to support himself among you, help him as you would an alien or a temporary resident, so that he can continue to live among you. Do not take interest of any kind from him, but fear your God, so that your countryman may continue to live among you. You must not lend him money at interest or sell him food at a profit.

Psalms 15 verse 5 says about the righteous man, who may ascend the hill of the Lord, that he “lends his money without usury.”

Ezekiel 18 verse 8 says that the righteous man “does not lend at usury or take excessive interest.”

In Nehemiah chapter 5 there is an account of how the poorer Jews who had returned from exile complained against the rich Jews who had lent them money to enable them to eat, but were now charging interest on the loans in such a way that they were effectively reducing them to slavery. Nehemiah roundly condemned the rich nobles, and told them to stop charging interest on these loans, which they did.

We can draw a direct application for ourselves in our church life. Suppose one of us were to fall on hard times, and could not afford to buy the next meal for him and his family. Suppose this person were to go to a better off believer and ask to borrow some money to buy his next meal. If the better off believer were to say to the poorer believer, “I will lend you the money, but only if, when you pay me back, you pay back 25 per cent on top of what you borrowed”, this would be quite wrong. The richer believer would be exploiting to poverty of his brother in Christ, making himself rich by means of the poorer brother’s poverty. Equally, if the richer believer were to say to the poorer believer, “I will only lend you this money if you will be my slave for a period of time” this also would be quite wrong.

However, we should not understand these verses to teach that lending at interest is always wrong in every circumstance. The Israelites were allowed to charge interest for lending to non-Israelites. In Deuteronomy chapter 23 verses 19 to 20, it is recorded that Moses said to the people,

Do not charge your brother interest, whether on money or food or anything else that may earn interest. **You may charge a foreigner interest**, but not a brother Israelite, so that the Lord your God may bless you in everything you put your hand to in the land you are entering to possess.

What was forbidden was for Israelites to lend at interest to other poor Israelites. They were not forbidden to charge interest in any circumstances.

Moreover, Jesus, in the parable of the talents, as recorded in Matthew 25 verse 27, said that the man who hid his talent was rebuked for not having placed his one talent with the banker, and for not having gained interest thereby. There is no hint in the passage that the servant would have been wrong to have gained interest for lending his money. Indeed, he was rebuked for not having done so.

In addition, there is an argument from love for making loans at interest. Suppose there is a budding entrepreneur. He has an idea for making a product which will benefit others, and which will provide employment to those who manufacture the product. He has one problem though: he has no funds to invest in making this new product. Suppose this entrepreneur goes to someone else who has money and says, "Please will you lend me some money to invest in making my new product? I will pay you back with interest." If the person with funds lends at interest to the person with the idea, both stand to gain: the person with funds makes a return on his capital, while the entrepreneur is able to make a product which will be useful to others, and will make a profit. Moreover, the person who lends the money bears some risk. He might not get his money back again. The business might fail. Also, if he lends his money out, he will not be able to use that money for other purposes during that period. Therefore it is fair that he should be compensated for these things by gaining interest on his loan.

It was this sort of reasoning which led Reformers like John Calvin to diverge from Roman Catholic teaching which forbade all lending at interest. Calvin argued that neither Scripture, nor the law of love, forbade loans at interest as long as both the lender and the borrower would benefit from such an arrangement. He said that that the golden rule of Christ, as recorded in Matthew chapter 7 verse 12, ("in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you") applies in this matter. A lender should only lend to a person what he knows is good for that person to borrow, and on terms that the borrower can afford, where he has reason to believe that the borrower will benefit from the loan.

Therefore, I do not think that it would necessarily be wrong for a believer to take out a mortgage to buy a house, if he has a realistic prospect of being able to afford the repayments. By so doing he has the prospect of saving money in the long term, as he will eventually have a valuable asset which he does not need to pay rent on. Nor would it necessarily be wrong for a professional plumber to take out a loan to buy a van for his work, as long as his income is sufficient to service the loan, as this will in all probability make him more productive and will increase his earnings. Nor do I think it would be wrong for a student to take out a loan to finance his time at university, if there is a strong probability that gaining a degree would increase his earnings potential, as long as he studies hard and gets himself a good degree.

So I do not think that this verse should be taken to mean we should never, as a matter of principle, take out a mortgage or a loan at interest.

3. If taking out a loan is not necessarily sinful, can there be times when taking out a loan is sinful, or at least unwise?

The answer to this question is yes, most definitely.

Although it must be said that taking out a loan with interest is not necessarily sinful, I would issue a strong warning against taking out loans to finance purchases of items to satisfy wants that are not strictly necessary. We must be very careful, particularly at the present time, because "credit" is very easily available to purchase cars, electrical items, furniture and so on, often at very high rates of interest. Some parents take out loans to buy expensive Christmas presents for their children, or to finance a "dream holiday", which, once the reality of repaying the loan to finance it starts to bite, quickly turns into a nightmare holiday. Some succumb to pressure from their families to have a very expensive wedding financed by taking out loans, meaning that their marriage gets off to a very shaky start, because they are straddled with large debts. Such loans can lead to great misery and unhappiness for those who take them out. You can slide into debt so easily, hardly noticing it. But once you are in debt, it can be very hard to get yourself out of it. Debt can be like a terrible ball and chain, which never goes away. It can lead people to the position where they are forced to work for far longer hours than is healthy in order to service debts that have been run up. Debt can force both partners in a marriage to have to work, when it would be better for the wife to stay at home and look after the children. Sometimes debt can lead a person to such despair that he becomes suicidal. Falling into debt is in many cases like becoming enslaved. You lose your freedom to do what you would want with your money. In some countries it does lead directly to bonded labour which is really slavery in all but name. The apostle says in 1 Corinthians chapter 7 verse 23, "You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men."

What is it that lies behind such debts? Often it is greed. You want something desperately, but you cannot afford it at the present time, so you take out a loan to finance it. Sometimes it is fear of man that leads a person into debt. A person feels that he would not be able to show his face before his friends if he did not put on an extravagant wedding, or buy a flashy car to drive around in.

We need to differentiate in our minds between a loan to purchase something which will save money or increase productivity, and a loan to purchase something which is a "nice-to-have" item. A loan to purchase

a house, or to buy equipment with which to run a business, may well be wise to take out, if you can afford the repayments, and if it will save money in the long run. But a loan in order to purchase a luxury item like a holiday, or flashy car, or new sofa, is very rarely going to be wise, and could well be disastrous.

I would therefore strongly advise that before you purchase a non-essential consumable item, you ask yourself the question, “Can I afford this at the present time?” Ask yourself, “Do I actually have enough money in my bank account to be able to make this purchase outright, without having to borrow in order to make the purchase?” Ask yourself further, “If I were to buy the item, would I run the risk of running out of money later in the month, or later in the year, so that I might not be able to buy what I will need later?” If the answer to any of these questions is “no”, I would strongly advise against buying the item.

If you are in any doubt about whether you can afford something, the simple rule should be, don't buy it now. Get by without it. Or look for a cheaper version of what you are thinking of buying, that you can afford. As the saying goes, “cut your cloth according to your income”. Or, you can simply postpone your purchase. If you find that you have money later, you can always buy it then, if you still think that it would be a good idea. You may well find, if you delay a purchase, that the Lord provides what you need in some other way. Someone may offer to give you what you thought you needed to buy.

If you want to get married, but cannot afford a big wedding with a posh reception, then have a simple affair at the church building with a bring and share tea afterwards.

It is never worth putting yourself into debt in order to purchase luxury items. It is far better to go without than to put yourself in the misery and stress of having debt around your neck.

4. How can we overcome the temptation to take loans to satisfy wants and desires?

The answer is to learn to be content with what we have. The apostle Paul says in Philippians chapter 4 verses 11 to 13 that he has “learned to be content whatever the circumstances”. He says, “I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or

hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength.”

In Hebrews chapter 13 verses 5 and 6, the writer says, “Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.” So we say with confidence, “The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?” ”

Another important thing is to learn to fear God rather than fearing man. It really does not matter what others think of you, or what they think about how classy your house is, or what they think about your car. What matters is what God thinks of you. Jesus said, as recorded in Matthew chapter 10 verse 28, “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”

5. What should we do if we are in debt?

I have spent quite a bit of time talking about issues to do with getting into debt. What should we do if we find ourselves in debt, either because of valid decisions like taking out a mortgage, or because of foolish decisions in the past, like borrowing to finance luxuries, or because we have simply not had enough money to buy even the most basic necessities? What does this verse tell us we should do? It tells us that we should pay off our debts. Let me mention some specific ways in which this should work out:

1) We should keep to terms that are agreed with a lender.

If you have taken out a loan, how did you agree to repay it? Did you say that you would repay a certain amount each month? In that case you must keep to what was agreed and do what you said, if you possibly can. If you do not do so, you have broken your word. You are being unfaithful. God is faithful. He keeps his word. As his children, we should also keep our word. If we hold on to what we have been lent for longer than we have agreed, then we are effectively stealing. Not paying debts according to terms can cause terrible damage to relationships with others. If the lender is not a Christian, your behaviour gives a very poor testimony. People will say about you, “He took out this loan. He agreed these terms, but he is not keeping his word. And

he calls himself a Christian." If the lender is a Christian, not repaying a loan risks causing a breach of fellowship.

If you realise that you are not going to be able to keep to the terms that you agreed with your lender, then go to him and seek to renegotiate the terms of the loan. In the Sermon on the Mount, as recorded in Matthew's Gospel chapter 5 verses 25 to 26, Jesus says,

Settle matters quickly with you adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still with him on the way, or he may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. I tell you the truth, you will not be handed over until you have paid the last penny.

These verses are clearly primarily intended as an encouragement to get right with God while we can. But they also speak to us about the need to get right with those whom we have offended as quickly as possible. If you have got behind in repayments of a debt, it is only too easy to start to live in denial. Letters come through the door, and you quietly ignore them. If you are being chased for a debt, make contact with the person who is chasing you, and seek to come to an arrangement quickly.

2) We should pay bills and rent promptly.

When you get your pay cheque in, or a payment from income support, the first thing must be to pay what is due for rent, and for outstanding bills for things like electricity and gas. Only then should we buy other things. If you have work done for you, settle the invoice with the contractor quickly.

3) We should be very careful to repay small items that are borrowed off others.

You might say to someone, "I forgot to bring any money with me when I went out. Please could you lend me five pounds, so I can buy some bread and milk on the way home? I will pay you back when I next see you." You should remember to pay back your friend when you do next see him. Someone may lend you a book. Remember to return it. It might be worth going through all the things you have in your house, and asking yourself, "Whose are these? Were they borrowed from someone else?" To hold onto the possessions of others is a form of theft.

Conclusion

Christianity is relevant to every area of life, even to the matter of how we spend our money, and taking out loans and servicing loans. We must make sure that we are thoroughly Christian in the way we handle money, as well as in all other matters. I would remind you that all that we have talked about this morning is part of the outworking of the principle in verse 1 of chapter 12, that we are to offer our bodies to God as a living sacrifice, as a way of saying “thank you” to him for all the mercies we have received in the Gospel.

The great good news is that even though, because of our sin, we owed to God a vast moral debt, much greater than we could possibly pay. God has paid that debt for us, by sending his only Son into the world, to die on the Cross for us. If you believe in Christ, you are debt-free, morally. All the debt that you owed to God has been paid. You do not need to fear the judgement day, because the price for your sin has been paid in full.

Do you know this for yourself? Have you confessed to God that you are a sinner who deserves hell, and have you come to Christ for forgiveness? If you have never done so, I urge you to do so now, before it is too late.

This booklet contains the edited notes of a sermon which was preached by Henry Dixon. A recording of the actual sermon that was preached may be found at

<https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=713192032416899>

This booklet is produced by Poplar Baptist Church, Zetland Street, London E14 6RB, from where further copies may be obtained. Our services on Sunday are at 10.30 a.m. and 5.00 p.m.. You will be very welcome to attend these. The church building is situated on the corner of Zetland Street and the Blackwall Tunnel Approach Road. It is ½ mile south of Bromley-by-Bow underground station, and ¼ mile from Langdon Park DLR station, and the 309 and D8 buses pass the door. If you would like to discuss any spiritual matter arising from this booklet, feel free to contact our Pastor, Henry Dixon, on 020 7001 7776, or enquiries@poplarbaptistchurch.org

Unless otherwise stated, scripture quotations are from the New International Version, 1984 edition.

Copyright © 2019 Henry Dixon. This booklet may be reproduced, as long as it is reproduced in full, and the author and this copyright notice is also reproduced in full. For all other reproduction, please refer to Henry Dixon