

Articles and Sermons :: GOSPEL DEBTORS by Daniel Kenaston**GOSPEL DEBTORS by Daniel Kenaston - posted by InTheLight (), on: 2004/9/19 18:14**

When we consider the Word of God regarding our duty to preach the gospel to a world full of lost souls, we find a great variety of word pictures and arguments used to communicate the compelling nature and great responsibility of this work. Ezekiel 33 speaks of this subject using the example of a watchman who fails in his duty to warn the citizens of the city, and by this failure is guilty of the blood of those who die. Romans 10 builds a convicting argument on the fact that those who have not been told cannot believe, and those who do not believe are lost. II Corinthians 5 speaks of the inclusive nature of the salvation bought by Jesus's death and depicts us as standing between God and men in the stead of Christ, reconciling lost men back to their God. These and many other Scriptures reveal our responsibility to be actively involved in the work of sharing this great gospel news.

A Debtor's Motives

We may prefer to look at the work of taking the gospel to the world in the more positive light of watching people's lives being transformed and freed from bondage, of laying up treasures in heaven by using them here to do God's work, or of simply loving our fellow men enough to share with them the truth that has made us new creatures. Many verses speak of preaching the gospel, and Paul especially makes note of the joy he found in being an evangelist or carrier of the Good News.

If the motives of heavenly reward and joy over lives renewed are enough to motivate you to lay down your life for the cause of Christ, so be it. But my own testimony, which seems to be backed up by Paul's experience, is that there are times when the good feelings are gone, either through exhaustion or through pain of persecution. At times like these, we must have a solid foundation of conviction and commitment to undergird our missionary endeavors (whether here or there). Otherwise, we will find ourselves failing to fulfill our responsibility to a Christ-less humanity.

One foundational understanding that has been made very clear and convincing to me over the last couple of months is the concept of Gospel Debtors; I am a debtor both to the Greeks and also to the Barbarians; both to the wise and also to the unwise. (Romans 1:14).

Enslaved by Debt

Down through history, writers both sacred and secular have written about debt and what it can do to the lives of those who are enslaved by it. We have read of people sent to the debt prisons or forced to sell their children to pay off a loan. Others, though free, were forced by the load of debt they carried to be virtual slaves to their creditors.

The Bible has much to say about debt. Verses like Proverbs 22:7b (the borrower is servant to the lender;) make clear the kind of responsibility and burden that come along with it. In modern-day North America with its consumer credit craze, certainly all of us have known someone who through circumstances or choices found themselves strapped to a half-dozen monthly payments. We have watched these people make their every move in the light of the debt hanging over them; We have watched them strain to make each payment, working overtime and sacrificing pleasures; all with the end goal of paying off their debt.

I remember as a boy the joy of my parents when we finally paid off a medical debt after more than five years of slowly paying it down one month at a time. I remember also gathering for a mortgage burning with a church family whom my parents had counseled through their debt crisis. It was a time of rejoicing for this family who was finally able to pay off the loan on their home. Through personal experience or through observing others, all of us have at least a partial understanding of the pathos of being in debt.

A Universal Debt

It is this very feeling that Paul is tapping into when he uses the concept of debt to describe his (and our!) responsibility to the world that is without Christ. To Paul, it was a privilege to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles; he loved his lifework assigned to him by God. But as he explains to the believers at Rome his motive for coming to them, he uses the idea of his being indebted to them. In essence, Paul was saying to them, I am sure that I will be coming to you

ou sometime soon because I have a debt to pay; as soon as possible I want to discharge this duty to you.”

But Paul does not limit his “debt” to simply preaching to the people of Rome. In his day the world was essentially divided into two parts: the Greeks (highly cultured and learned) and the Barbarians (representing the rest of the world where the Greek language and culture had not gone). When Paul spoke of being “a debtor both to the Greeks and also to the Barbarians,” he was in essence saying, “I am in debt to the whole world.”

A Debt That Motivates

As we labor here for Christ, we often look to the Word of God to reinforce our conviction that God has sent us here and to strengthen our hearts to face the constant strain and difficulty that accompany ministry in tribal Africa. When we contemplate God’s heart for the lost and the rewards for the laborers, many things encourage us. At times we feel a genuine thrill at being allowed to harvest souls for God here. However, there are also times when God’s Word speaks to us not in the heady realms of spiritual excitement, but in the sobering reality of our responsibility to the world. God has used this word picture of debt to motivate us deeply over the last few months during some hard trials and to give us a better understanding of why we are here.

We are real American people used to comfort, and we need a deep heart conviction that what we are doing is not crazy, but rather our duty, if we are going to persevere in this field. During long hot nights when the children cry from heat rash and the electricity is off (and hence, the fans), during long hours that seem like days with one of the family suffering with a high malaria fever, during long bike rides under a scorching African sun, during weeks of particular attack from the enemy against the emerging leadership of the church here—it is during these times that we run in our hearts to the strong belief that we are here not to do some good deed for mankind or earn points for heaven, but rather to pay off a debt that we have to God and the Konkombas.

It was during one of these times that God started to open our eyes to the lessons we can learn from these verses, and we would like to share this with you. Maybe your heart can be sensitized to feel some of the responsibility Paul felt, as we ponder our indebtedness to lost souls. Or maybe you are growing weary in your labors as we often do. Hopefully you can join with us in gaining a deeper understanding of God’s call on the lives of His children and allow this truth to re-energize your efforts.

Reasons for Indebtedness

Taking into account all of Paul’s writing regarding his calling to preach the gospel, it is clear he felt indebted because of two things. First, Paul held in his heart the precious truth that could set mankind free and restore souls to a right relationship with God. In the same way nomads in the desert feel duty-bound to tell others where the next oasis is, Paul felt that his possession and experience of the gospel created an imperative as equally binding as a debt. Paul felt indebted to both the One who gave him salvation, and to those who, through lack of knowledge, were still lost.

Secondly, Paul had a clear call from God that redirected the entire course of his life, and he felt compelled to honor the obligations placed on his life by God. Even after the Damascus-road meeting, Paul’s life was guided by the commission that God gave to him. He looked at his sacrifice and suffering not as something extraordinary, but as only his reasonable service. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 9:16b, “Woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel!” From this verse, we can see this necessity is equal to a debt which Paul felt obligated to repay in the most valuable and rare currency of a life poured out. Paul says, “I live my life under the realization of a tremendous debt, which will only be repaid when all have heard of the Christ I know, or when I die trying to finish the task.” This kind of conviction made Paul get up from the stoning he received in Lystra and go to the next town.

Sometimes as I bike alone for hours to a distant village, I wonder what I am doing, and it is slowly dawning on me that I feel under an obligation to do this work. That obligation or necessity is not born out of a mystic force overriding my nature or normal thinking, but rather by deeply felt understandings of the gospel of Christ and the lost condition of the world. Paul was drawn by the persuasive but gentle belief that he had a debt to pay! So we see that our great missionary hero, Paul, was at times motivated by high spiritual passion to reach the lost, but at other times he continued to be faithful simply because he felt under a double obligation, one divine and one human, to keep sharing the good news.

Scenes of Indebtedness

Maybe in the cushioned and sanitized world of North America you are not faced as often with the awfulness of sin, theref

ore you do not see as clearly that you have a debt to pay. Living here where Christ has not been known, I feel in my very bones the debt I owe to the Konkombas when I view their life of fear, darkness, and slavery to sin in comparison to my own life of freedom and joy in Christ. I have a debt to pay! View with me what I often witness, and sense the debt we jointly owe not only to the Konkombas, but to all of the Christ-less people groups of the world.

I am attending a funeral with its common occurrence of spirit manifestation, and again I look into the glazed eyes of a woman controlled by the familiar spirit of the deceased. I see first the joy in the crowds at the thought that the one now long dead has come back to acknowledge the funeral that is held in his honor. To a people who worship the spirits of the ancestors, this is a wonderful blessing on the funeral they are celebrating. Later, I see the fear begin to rise in the faces of the crowd as the spirit refuses to leave the one whose body it has possessed. As the crowd begins to beg, plead, and then make sacrifices to placate the evil spirit, I watch these dear people, and in my heart I cannot escape the feeling that I owe a tremendous debt to the souls here.

It is 6 o'clock in the evening on a market day as I head towards the market no longer filled with buying and selling, but filled instead with dozens of drunken Konkomba men, staggering around, fighting, etc. Other passersby laugh, but I am not laughing as I gaze at the spectacle before me. I know where the power lies to break these chains, and I have a debt to pay.

A couple of men squat in front of me as I sit waiting for a village service to begin. They explain to me that they are from another village just three miles away and that they have been waiting a long time for someone to come and help them learn to follow God. They have heard we are helping the people of this village to follow God, so they have come to beg me to come and teach them also. This has happened many times, not only to me, but also to all of our village church leaders. It happened just three nights ago, and again I felt keenly the debt I owe to Christ and to the people here.

A half-crippled neighbor woman walks slowly past our compound trying to carry her little one on her hip while balancing a load of wood on her head. The child is restless and fussy and finally wiggles from his mother's grip and slides to the ground, still crying. The mother stands there for a moment trying to figure out how to pick up her little one without dropping her precariously balanced load of wood. Seeing her plight, I run over to lift the child up onto her hip again. He is severely malnourished and, though nearly as old as Nathaniel, weighs barely more than a healthy newborn. My heart bleeds for this child and his mother; both are outcasts who are valued very little in a society that already places little value on women and children. I hurt for the child, suffering everyday with hunger and other sickness, and for the mother, handicapped but forced to try to work as a normal Konkomba woman would. These are physical problems, and we are putting forth efforts to alleviate their suffering. But the burden I feel is a spiritual one, for again I see the wicked one and his plan to capture and enslave our people through their cultural practices and values. Because I know the Great Emancipator who can free mother, child, and tribe from the bondages that have created this terrible situation, I feel supremely indebted to my people.

Driven by Debt

Now think of the feelings that surround debt, what it does to people, and how it affects their choices. Think about the burden they carry and the way their entire lives are guided by the thought that they MUST repay the debt that they owe. A debt can drive a person to do unusual things, get up earlier, work harder and later, make sacrifices, etc. One of the most incredible things is that though people may wonder why a person is thus driven, once they hear that the person is in debt, they understand perfectly. We do not blame people who overwork to repay a debt; we rather feel it to be part of the responsibility of a debtor to make sacrifices to settle the debt! He is trying to repay a debt; is a phrase that acceptably explains many unusual behaviors.

Oh, that God would use the pathos we feel when relating to debts and transcribe this to our hearts in the way we view the lost and our duty to them! Oh, that it would become common for us to do unusual things because of the gospel debt we owe to the world! Have we become so used to holding the key to the salvation of souls that we no longer feel any responsibility to do anything with it? Has it been so long since we made a payment that hurt that we have forgotten entirely about the debt?

Repaying Our Debt

Certainly the ones to whom we must repay this debt may not be able to locate and hound us, but this does not mean that we are not guilty. Scripture declares that Judgment Day will not only be a time of separating the damned from the blessed, but also of facing our responsibilities and what we did with them. The debt we owe is great, and its payment will not

be completed in our lifetime. We will not be judged by whether we entirely paid the debt, but by whether we spent our life in pursuit of its payment.

So often we fail because, when the excitement wears off and we are faced with the hard realities of ministering the gospel, we are left hanging with no real drive to propel us back into the fray. So often our gospel work is inhibited because only those with high spiritual desires have the motivation to go and do, rather than our outreach being the response of a universal debt felt by every individual in our assemblies. Oh, if we could somehow adjust our viewpoint of our service to God, change it from being some elite service we are providing, and bring it down to the common idea of a debt that needs paying! What a difference this would make if all felt the duty!

Whether we feel it or not, the responsibility of lost souls passing into eternity even as we write IS shared by all of us, and we will answer to the obligation laid upon us by God as well as to the duty we have to our fellow men. May God have mercy both on us and on the lost. May He change our understanding of the debt we owe. May He then use this transformed motivation to launch us out into the world with a strengthened heart and burden to work till "the night cometh, when no man can work"; (John 9:4b).