

About 6 weeks before graduation from seminary I was summoned to the dean's office. When I arrived, the dean said he wanted to ask a favor of me. Well, I was very fond of the dean, and during my 3 years in seminary he had been very kind and had done MANY things for the Haneys. So I probably owed him more than one favor.

The dean said that he had received a 60-page manuscript of a book from an Episcopal lay person in South Carolina. The man was writing about his perspectives on many varied aspects of the Christian faith and wanted feedback and constructive criticism. The dean said the book was rather uneven, that parts of it were quite good, and that there were some minor problems in some areas and a couple of major problems in others.

Plus, there such a wide variety of topics that there was no seminary professor that was a good fit as a reviewer. On top of that, there was a rather extensive section on evolution, and the dean knew I had scientific training. So the dean wanted me to take on the task of giving the man feedback that was biblically and theologically accurate, and yet also pastorally sensitive.

So out of both intellectual curiosity as well as my fondness for the dean, I agreed. I read through the book and wrote up some detailed feedback to send to the author.

The dean was right—much of it was quite good and was easy to praise. And there were a number of minor and medium factual errors which I pointed out. And there were a couple areas that were rather problematic and idiosyncratic that I tried to push back on. And one of those areas was the man's views of Paul.

There were several problems with this author's view of Paul. One of them was that Paul's message ran counter to Jesus' message, the essence of which the author summed up in Jesus' command to love your neighbor as yourself.

I pushed back on this idea that somehow Paul's message was the opposite of Jesus' message of love. No, I said, the essence of Paul's understanding of the Good News of Jesus Christ was tied up in the idea of love.

I quoted from one of Paul's earliest Epistles, Galatians, where Paul writes, "The whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"¹

I talked about the superlative hymn to love that Paul writes in the entire 13th chapter of 1 Corinthians, a hymn to the centrality of Christian love that's so poetic and so powerful that couples often choose it to be read at their weddings:

"Faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love."²

And I also quoted from today's Epistle lesson from Romans ch13. Paul says, "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;

¹ Gal 5:14

² 1Cor 13:13

You shall not steal; You shall not covet'; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"³

Back in July I had talked about the glorious 8th chapter of Romans, which is one of the greatest chapters about God's amazing love for us.

And now in the 13th chapter of Romans, Paul is talking about Christians responding to God's love by loving one another AND loving our neighbors as well.

On the night before his crucifixion Jesus gave his followers these marching orders. He said "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another."⁴

Jesus is saying 'Just as I have loved you, or in the same way as I have loved you, or as much as I have loved you, that's the way you are to love others.'

How did Jesus love us? How much did Jesus love us? Enough to be willing to sacrifice himself, to give his life on our behalf. And we are to love others that much.

Thus Christians owe one debt that we can never repay. That is the continuing obligation to love others. We don't ever pay off that obligation. We don't reach the end and say done. There's always more we can do. Jesus loved us. And we pay it forward by loving others.

I was trying to pay it forward in 1995. Out of love for my seminary dean I was taking on giving feedback to the man from South Carolina. And it was out of love for him as well, as a fellow Christian.

And he responded in love. About a month after I sent my feedback to him, I heard back from him. I had graduated and been ordained as a transitional deacon and had moved my wife and 4-month-old son back to Texas to start my ministry. And one morning in the church mailbox was a letter from South Carolina. It was a very kind thank you letter from the author letting me know how appreciative he was of my efforts and feedback. And included in the envelope was an extremely generous check as a combination thank you/graduation/ordination gift. That was a very nice and loving surprise for our young family.

Owe no one anything except to love one another. That's the most important way we can pay it forward. That's the most important way we can respond to God's amazing love for us.

³ Rom 13:8-9

⁴ Jn 13:34