

13. Romans 13 – 14



‘You are all one in the Messiah Jesus’ (Galatians 3:28)

Romans 13:1

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities.

Paul has just said: ‘ If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all’ (12:18). Tension had been building up between the Jews in Palestine and the occupying Roman authority. At times agitation spread to other centres as well. Against this background, and in view of the fact that Paul is writing to the community in the capital of the Empire, we are not surprised to find him turning his attention to the kind of relations expected of disciples of Jesus towards civil authority. He is concerned that the Jews in Rome not get caught up in the conflicts that were growing in Palestine.

Romans 13:1-3

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad.

Throughout this passage, Paul focuses on the delegated nature of civil authority. His words cannot be used to support a position that demands obedience of any and every decision of government. On the contrary, he is speaking on the assumption that ‘**rulers are not a terror to good conduct**’. Paul is not making a general statement that all government is necessarily like this; nor is he passing a practical judgment on conditions in Rome, though Nero’s first five years as emperor (54-68AD) were in fact quite promising. Paul is writing in 57AD. Nero had not yet shown any hostility to Christians and the generally dissolute behaviour for which he became renowned was to become evident only later.

Romans 13:3-7

Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; for it is God's servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience. For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, busy with this very thing. Pay to all what is due them – taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honour to whom honour is due.

Paul is stating that there is nothing in Christianity which demands, on principle, that one be anti-government. On the contrary, on the generous assumption that government is legitimate, in a justly-ordered state civil authority is from God, and Christians are to be subject to it. His teaching is traditional.

We recall the instructions given to the exiles in Babylon: 'Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare' (Jeremiah 29:7).

Nothing Paul writes here is to be understood as taking away the right and duty to resist if and when civil authority acts against God's will. His own death surely witnesses to this.

Romans 13:8-10

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' (Exodus 20:13-17) and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, 'Love your neighbour as yourself' (Leviticus 19:18). Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

Having just spoken about what is 'due' by way of obligations towards civil authority (13:7), Paul stresses again the most fundamental Christian obligation: that of love. Earlier he wrote: 'Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good' (12:9). Thinking of relations within the community, he went on to say: 'love one another with mutual affection' (12:10). As he now states, this love is to reach out to everyone.

love is the fulfilling of the law.

Paul sees love as summing up the commandments of the decalogue that refer to one's neighbour. We find the same teaching in his Letter to the Galatians: 'The whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself"' (Galatians 5:14).

Rabbi Hillel, one of the leading Rabbis in Jerusalem during Jesus' boyhood, would agree with Paul's summary of the law. He is quoted as saying: 'What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbour: that is the whole Law, while the rest is commentary thereof; go and learn it.' The great Rabbi Akiba (died 135AD) called the text from Leviticus 'the great summation of the law'.

Paul sees Jesus as the goal towards which the law was aiming (10:4). Jesus fulfilled the law by the perfection of his faith and his loving obedience to God. United to him, 'nothing can separate us from God's love' (8:39). It is this divine love, 'poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us' (5:5), that is to flow through us to all those whom God loves and 'for whom the Messiah died' (14:15).

Romans 13:11-14

Besides this, you know what hour it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light; let us live honourably as in the day, not in revelling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus the Messiah, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Paul reminded the Galatians: 'As many of you as were baptised into the Messiah have clothed yourselves with him' (Galatians 3:27). This is not a once for all action. It is to be repeated each day in our struggle against the desires of the flesh. As he said to the Galatians: 'Live by the Spirit and do not gratify the desires of the flesh' (Galatians 5:16). To 'put on the Lord Jesus the Messiah' is to live in him.

Romans 14:1

Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarrelling over opinions.

One can only wonder at the power of Paul's mind, the passion of his faith and the delicacy of the love with which he has built up to the matter to which he now turns his attention. The problem which he addresses goes to the heart of the gospel and of the mission of the church in the world. Paul has spoken of God's design to bring all to salvation by drawing all into the community of faith of those who belong to Jesus and who form the living temple of his Spirit. He had come to see in the self-giving in love of Jesus on the cross and in the outpouring of the Spirit of the risen Jesus, God's way of fulfilling the promises and the hopes that inspired Judaism, and the longings of the Gentile world for salvation.

The Roman empire had awakened a longing for peace and for a communion of peoples that had never been previously even imagined. Paul saw in the Christian church God's answer to this human longing. The way to true peace was through communion in the love to which Jesus witnessed on the cross and which 'has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us' (5:5).

It was especially important that the Christian community in Rome witness to this communion in love and that it be, to Jews and to all the diverse nations of the empire, a sign of God's design to bring about a new world in which love would bind everyone together into the communion with God which was always God's intention. Yet there was in the community a strong majority, made up for the most part if not entirely of Gentile Christians, who were insisting on their point of view in matters that were not central to the faith, but only matters of 'opinion', and who were failing to welcome others whom they considered 'weak in faith'.

Paul has spoken particularly of love that transcends differences, and of humility. He is now ready to appeal to the members of the Roman community to recognise where they are failing in this regard. They must change their behaviour. Their response will determine their place in contributing to the fulfilment of nothing less than God's providential design to bring about 'the salvation of everyone who believes, the Jew first and also the Greek' (1:16; 2:9-10) through the proclamation of the gospel and the building of community among those who believe.

The problem which Paul is addressing is one that continues to arise. The sins which he names continue to interfere with the mission of the church. We all have much to learn from the wisdom of Paul's appeal.

Romans 14:2-4

Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. Who are you (singular) to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand.

Paul's first example concerns eating meat. Some of the community felt free to eat any kind of meat, and they considered 'weak' in faith those who expressed scruples in the matter. While this latter group may have included converts from the Pythagorean school, which inculcated strict vegetarianism, it probably consisted mainly of Jewish Christians who continued to observe the regulations of the Torah in regard to not eating certain foods, and so avoided eating meat purchased at the market or offered them in a home.

Paul tackled this problem very thoroughly in his first letter to the Corinthians, chapters 8 to 10. His words here are briefer but quite as profound. As he has just said, there is room for differences of opinion in matters that are not essential to the faith. The problem is not that some are eating certain foods while others are not. It lies, rather, with those who are breaking the bond of communion by looking down on certain members of the community as being weak in faith because they observe these regulations. They are doing in reverse what the Judaising Christian missionaries were doing in Galatia. They are, in effect, saying that to be saved you have to stop living as a Jew and live like a Gentile.

Challenged in this way, and reacting against being made to feel like second-class Christians, some of the Jewish Christians have accused the Gentiles of failing to follow the law of God concerning 'righteous Gentiles', commands which had been affirmed also by the Assembly of Jerusalem and which required certain behaviour of Gentiles who shared table fellowship with Jews (see Acts 15:29). It is likely that the dispute was having an impact also on the wider Jewish community and was creating an impediment to their acceptance of the gospel.

Paul knows that the solution to the problem is not going to be found at the level of regulations. It can be found only through loving respect of the different groups for each other with their differences. They must stop passing judgment on each other. This is to be left to God. In the meantime, God has welcomed the different members with their differences. They must learn to do the same, in love.

Romans 14:5-6

Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. Those who observe the day, observe it in honour of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honour of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honour of the Lord and give thanks to God.

The second example refers to the practice of celebrating certain days: the Sabbath, for example, or certain traditional fast days. Here, the problem is that Gentile Christians are failing to respect behaviour that is important to their Jewish brothers and sisters. Paul asks everyone in the community to look at why certain ones keep certain days. It is the motivation that is important. What matters is that they are doing it because of the Lord

Romans 14:7-12

We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end the Messiah died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living. Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. For it is written, 'As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God' (Isaiah 49:18 and 45:23). So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

What matters is belonging to the Lord and giving 'unhindered devotion to the Lord' (1 Corinthians 7:35). If their attention is on the Lord, they will not be living for themselves, but for him. This will be demonstrated by the way they respect others, with their differences.

Romans 14:13

Let us no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another.

Paul is concerned because of the possibility of putting a ‘stumbling block’ or a ‘hindrance’ (σκάνδαλον) in someone’s way. It is a question of obedience to God and not behaving in a way that disregards God’s will and separates one, therefore, from communion with God. We recall the words of Jesus: ‘If any of you put a stumbling block (σκάνδαλον) before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea’ (Matthew 18:6).

We should be very sensitive to the consciences of others and not bring pressure upon them that could cause them to sin.

Romans 14:14-15

I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. If your brother or sister is being injured by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. Do not let what you eat cause the ruin of one for whom the Messiah died.

Speaking from his communion with the risen Jesus, Paul shares with them his conviction that things are not 'unclean' in themselves. He echoes a statement made by Jesus: 'There is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile ... (Thus he declared all foods clean.)' (Mark 7:15,19).

However, when it comes to human decisions, more is involved than the objective dimension of the way things are. Perception and motivation are essential dimensions of human moral behaviour. So, even though ‘**nothing is unclean in itself**’, it can be unclean for a person to act in a certain way if he/she does so in bad conscience. What matters in a Christian community is that we ‘**walk in love**’, recognising in others whose perception is different from our own ‘**one for whom the Messiah died**’ (compare I Corinthians 8:11).

Romans 14:16-23

¹⁶So do not let your good be spoken of as evil. ¹⁷For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. ¹⁸The one who thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and has human approval. ¹⁹Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding. ²⁰Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for you to make others fall by what you eat; ²¹it is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that makes your brother or sister stumble. ²²The faith that you have, have as your own conviction before God. Blessed are those who have no reason to condemn themselves because of what they approve. ²³But those who have doubts are condemned if they eat, because they do not act from faith; for whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.

The danger is that, for whatever motive, people may be persuaded to follow the example of others even though it means going against their conscience. A person's judgment, as in the case of the dominant majority in the community, may be objectively correct, and so good. There is, in fact, nothing wrong with eating certain foods. However, if, through lack of love, we act without regard to the conscience of others and become the occasion of their sinning, it will be seen that our judgment was, considered as a whole, bad. If we are interested in objective truth, the ultimate objective truth is that God is love. A judgment that lacks love lacks truth.

In Christ they have found freedom from restrictive regulations in areas that are in themselves of no moral consequence. They must realise that this freedom is in order that they might be more sensitive to the prompting of the Holy Spirit who is working to bring about the 'kingdom of God'. As Paul wrote to the Galatians: 'you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another' (Galatians 5:13). The signs of the working of the Spirit of the risen Christ are given as 'righteousness and peace and joy'.

It is correct to apply one's faith intelligently, and to be confidently free from scruples. But we must recognise that not everyone has this strength, and that for some to behave in certain ways does put them in bad conscience. Paul is not asking them to waver in their faith. He is asking them to be sensitive to other people's consciences.

The profound wisdom of this passage, and Paul's conviction of the fundamental importance of love, invite us to reflect deeply and prayerfully on the way we behave in community. Paul speaks to the Galatians of 'the only thing that counts'. He does not go on to speak of the degree of objective truth that is found in our opinions, important though this obviously is. Rather, he speaks of 'faith working through love' (Galatians 5:6). If we act from any other basis than our faith in what God is offering us in Jesus, we will find ourselves slipping back into sin, into the kind of behaviour that Paul described in the first section of this letter, or again in chapter seven.

Christ has freed us from this, let us open wide our hearts to the love that is being poured in by the Holy Spirit, and let us let this love flow out to all. This is Paul's appeal.

In chapter fourteen Paul has given us a model for working through many problems that can exist in a Christian community. First of all he has some words to say to those who might consider themselves more broad-minded or better educated. Such people experience a certain freedom not to be so culturally-bound, to recognise the possibilities of thinking and behaving in unaccustomed ways, and to see that certain religious customs have only relative value. Paul admonished them not to look down on or **'despise'** (14:3,10) others, described here as being **'weak'**, who find offensive certain practices and ways of thinking, and are locked into other practices judged by the 'broad-minded' to be unnecessary and perhaps superstitious.

Paul also has words to say to the second group. He admonishes them not to judge the more 'liberal' members.

Paul is making the point to Jewish and Gentile members of the community that God is big enough to **'welcome both'** (14:3). Jesus died for both (14:15). Certain things are simply matters of **'opinion'** (14:1). What matters is **'giving honour to the Lord'** (14:6), and **'walking in love'** (14:15). All must avoid destroying **'the work of God'** (14:20). Discernment remains an obligation for all (14:13), There is a place for judging people's behaviour, so long as it is done humbly and in love, Judging others, however, is to be left to God (14:10-11).