

ROMANS 13-14 – RESPECT FOR CIVIL GOVERNMENT: THE WEAK IN THE FAITH



In Romans 13, Paul now turns to the relationships between Christians and worldly civil authorities. After all, the Jews had been conquered by the Roman general Pompey in 63 B.C., over a century ago. So, it is in this context that Paul wrote his epistle around 57 A.D, during the reign of *Emperor Nero* (A.D. 54-68), one of the cruelest and insane rulers of the Roman Empire. Yet, despite Nero's cruelty against the Jews, Paul exhorts Christians to be respectful and obedient to those in charge, so there may be peace and order.

As he states: "For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him *who practices evil*. Therefore, *you must be subject*, not only because of wrath but also *for conscience' sake*" (Rom. 13:3-5). In another epistle, he adds: "Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made *for all men, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence*" (1 Tim. 2:1-2). Thus, we must pray for rulers so they make wise decisions, maintain social order and avoid drawing the country into bloody and costly wars.

Of course, when there is a conflict between civil laws and God's laws, the answer is found in Acts 5:29, "We ought to obey God rather than men." That is why, in the early centuries, true Christians were faithful and peaceful citizens, but they did not participate in wars, just as we don't do today.

As Paul Johnson, in his famous book, *The History of Christianity*, explains: "Violence was abhorrent to the early Christians, who preferred death to resistance, and when he attempted to interpret Christ, Paul did not even attempt to defend the legitimate use of force. Again, it was [the Catholic] Augustine who gave western Christianity the fatal twist in this direction. As always, in his deep pessimism, he was concerned to take society as he found it and attempted to reconcile its vices with Christian endeavor. Men fought; had always fought; therefore, war had a place in the Christian

pattern of behavior, to be determined by the moral theologians. In Augustine's view, *war might always be waged, provided it was done so by the command of God*. This formulation of the problem was *doubly dangerous*. Not only did it *allow the existence of the 'just' war*, which became a *commonplace* of Christian moral theology; but it *discredited the pacifist, whose refusal to fight a war defined as 'just' by the ecclesiastical authorities became a defiance of divine commands*" (pp. 241-242, Kindle edition). Nothing has changed today.

So, why did Paul address this topic now? In his day, the Jews in Israel were on the verge of waging war against the Romans. A group of fanatical Jews, called Zealots, were murdering Roman officials in Israel and fellow Jews who supported Rome by paying taxes. Some ten years after Paul wrote this epistle, the Jews began a disastrous war against Rome that would end up devastating the country, destroying Jerusalem and its Temple, and causing millions of Jewish deaths.

Paul, anticipating the discontent he saw among the Jewish people, warned Christians they should not participate in a Jewish rebellion against the Roman state and instead should be respectful and obedient citizens. In fact, in A.D. 66, when war broke out between the Jews and the Romans, the Church in Jerusalem did not fight, but fled to Pella in A.D. 69, where according to Eusebius, it was protected from all that destruction.

Indeed, Paul respected Roman rule and had been protected by them from the Jewish mobs. He said members should also honor their authority.

As he says: "For because of this you...pay taxes, for they are God's ministers attending continually to this very thing. Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs...honor to whom honor" (Rom. 13:6-7). The taxes we pay are used to cover the costs of government services, and he exhorts us to pay them. The idea of disobeying or rebelling against authorities does not come from the New Testament. Only when those civil laws expressly go against God's law, such as if they command us to break the Sabbath or go to war, do we have to obey God rather than men, as the early Church did and we do too, thus avoiding resorting to violence.

Likewise, we shouldn't have a reputation for leaving unpaid debts, especially among fellow Church members. As Paul says, "Owe no one anything..." (Rom. 13:8). The Greek literally says, "Let each one pay off what he owes." We know that taking advantage of a loan goes against the Eighth Commandment, "You shall not steal," for borrowing and not paying back is a type of theft.

The only "debt" we should have is "to love one another, for he who loves another has *fulfilled* the law." The word "fulfill" in Gk. is *pleroo*, [fill to the full], the same verb Christ used in Mt. 5:17, when He said He came to "fulfill," not abolish, God's law.

We should never think this "debt" of love has been paid and thus stop sacrificing ourselves for our brethren. As Paul said elsewhere: "And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, *especially to those who are of the household of faith*" (Gal. 6:9-10).

On Christian love, Paul points to the Ten Commandments as *the basis* for loving each other, listing them by name. So, when he speaks of "the works of the law," it does *not* refer to the Ten Commandments at all, but to *the ceremonial law*.

As he states, "For *the commandments*, 'You shall not commit adultery,' 'You shall not murder,' 'You shall not steal,' 'You shall not bear false witness,' 'You shall not covet,' and if there is *any other commandment* [so it includes others, such as the Sabbath] are all summed up in this saying, namely, 'You shall *love* your neighbor as yourself.' *Love* does no harm to a neighbor; therefore, *love* is *the fulfillment* [Gk. *pleroma*] *of the law*" (Rom. 13:8-10). By the way, Sabbath-keeping is a manner of *loving* our neighbors, since, by attending Services and having fellowship, we *express* brotherly love.

He then urges us to practice this type of love while we can, before Christ returns. He says, "And do this, knowing the time, that now it is high time to *awake* out of sleep; for now our salvation is *nearer* than when we first believed. The night is far spent, the day is at hand. Therefore, let us cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light. Let us walk properly, as in the day, not in revelry and drunkenness, not in lewdness and lust, not in strife and envy. But *put on* the Lord

Jesus Christ, and *make no provision* [forethoughts] *for the flesh*, to fulfill its lusts" (Rom. 13:11-14).

Wiersbe's Commentary points out, "The first [admonition] is, '*Wake up!*' (see 1Thes. 5:1-11 and Mt. 25:1-13.) The second is, '*Clean up!*' We do not want to be found dressed in *dirty garments* when the Lord returns (1 Jn. 2:28-3:3). The Christian wears *the armor of light*, not *the deeds of darkness*. He has *no* reason to get involved in the sinful pleasures of the world. Finally, Paul says, '*Grow up!*' (Rom. 13:14). To 'put on' the Lord Jesus Christ means to become more like Him, to receive by faith all that He is for our daily living. We *grow* on the basis of *the food we eat*. This is why God warns us not to make *provisions* [don't think about how to satisfy] for the flesh. If we feed the flesh, we will fail; but if we feed the inner man the nourishing things of the Spirit, we will succeed."

In Rom. 14, Paul focuses on how to be patient with weaker brethren who are still immature in the faith, retaining past religious scruples. He says, "Receive one who is *weak in the faith*, but *not to disputes over doubtful* [or non-essential] *things*. For one believes he may *eat all things*, but he who is weak *eats only vegetables*. Let *not him who eats despise* him who does not eat, and let not him who *does not eat judge* him who *eats*; for God *has received him*. Who are you to judge another's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. Indeed, he will be made to stand, for God is able to make him stand" (Rom. 14:1-4).

The key to understanding what this section is all about is verse 14: "I know and am convinced by the Lord Jesus that there is nothing *unclean* [Gk. "*koinos*," common or ritually unclean] of itself; but to him who considers anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean." The term *koinos* is used in Mark 7:2, 15-23 to refer to *ceremonially unclean hands*, which was a Pharisaic tradition, but *not* a biblical one. Throughout the Bible, *koinos* refers to what is common or ritually unclean, and not to unclean animals, where the term *akathartos* is used (Acts 10:14). As Dr. Bacchiocchi points out, "That the Mosaic law is *not* at stake in Rom. 14 is also indicated by the term '*koinos*—common' which is used in vs. 14 to designate 'unclean' food. This term is radically different from the word '*akathartos*—impure' used in Lev. 11 (*Septuagint*)

to designate unlawful foods" (*The Sabbath Under Crossfire*, 1998, p. 251).

As *The Life Application Commentary* clarifies: "What is weak faith? Paul is speaking about *immature faith* that has not yet developed the muscle it needs to stand against external pressures. For example, if a person who once worshiped idols were to become a Christian, he might understand perfectly well that Christ saved him through faith and that idols have no real power. Still, because of his past associations, he might be *badly shaken if he knowingly ate meat that had been used in idol worship as part of a pagan ritual...so the person weaker in the faith eats only vegetables*. But how would Christians end up eating meat...offered to idols?"

"The ancient system of sacrifice was at the center of the religious, social, and domestic life of the Roman world. After a sacrifice was presented to a god in a pagan temple, *only part of it was burned*. The remainder was often sent to the market to be sold. Thus, a Christian might easily—even unknowingly—*buy such meat in the marketplace or eat it at the home of a friend*. Should a Christian question the source of the meat? Some thought there was nothing wrong with eating meat...offered to idols because idols were worthless and phony. Others carefully checked the source of their meat or *gave up meat altogether*, in order to avoid a guilty conscience...Paul also deals with this problem in 1 Cor. 8 [and 10]."

Another example of "weak" or immature brethren was insisting in *keeping certain days as religious fasts*. Paul states: "One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind. He who *observes the day*, observes it to the Lord; and he who does not observe the day, to the Lord he does not observe it. *He who eats*, eats to the Lord, for he gives God thanks; and *he who does not eat*, to the Lord he does not eat, and gives God thanks. For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself" (Rom. 14:5-7).

Hence, this is not talking about the Sabbath or Holy Days, that are *not suggestions* but God's commands. As David Stern explains: "The reference here *does not refer to the Holy Days*, but to any day that a believer may have thought

especially sacred. This is because the 'weak' brethren were not singled out as Jews, but rather as any human being who was following the observances of a particular calendar" (*Jewish New Testament Commentary*). To this day, Jews have designated fast days. So, on those assigned days, a member would not eat and instead, fast. Others didn't do it and then would be criticized by them.

In Paul's day, it was a religious practice among Gentiles and Jews to set aside certain days for fasting. For example, the Pharisee boasted before the tax collector, saying, "I fast twice a week" (Luke 18:12). *This was done on Mondays and Thursdays*. They also had days in certain months when they fasted, as noted in Zechariah 7:1-5. All of this was invented by Pharisaic Jews and they elevated it to a commandment. But Paul explains, now this does not apply, for each Christian can choose the day they wanted to set aside to fast "for the Lord." Except for the Day of Atonement, there is no other date designated for fasting in the Bible.

Paul then warns them: "But why do you judge your brother? Or why do you show contempt for your brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ...So then each of us shall give account of himself to God. *Therefore, let us not judge one another anymore, but rather resolve this, not to put a stumbling block or a cause to fall in our brother's way...Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food* [the eating or not eating in certain designated days]. All things indeed are pure [to eat since in this case they are not ritually impure], but *it is evil for the man who eats with offense* (see 1 Cor. 8:7-13). It is good *neither to eat meat nor drink wine* nor do anything by which your brother stumbles or is offended or is made weak. Do you have faith? Have it to yourself before God. Happy is he who does not *condemn* himself in what he approves" (Rom. 14:10-13, 20-22).

In other words, Paul is saying there are issues in the Bible that are not specified, such as when to fast. Each person can personally decide that. This principle applies in our days. Sometimes brethren can become obsessed with an issue—such as what bread or sugar to eat or of only eating vegetables. It's up to them to choose the diet they desire, but imposing it on others, or considering it as more biblical, as Paul pointed out, is plainly wrong.