

Romans 13 & 14 – Practical Issues

From about **verse 9** of the previous chapter, Paul has moved from describing the 'grace gifts' into a more general description of how God's grace needs to work in our lives, and he continues into **chapter 13**. This not a set of rules for us to try to follow by external application, but an ongoing exhortation to see our lives being transformed from the inside – and generating visible results. If Paul had written these later chapters without the earlier chapters (especially **ch.5-8**), he would have been placing his readers under legalistic obligation to do all these things, but without sharing with them the means by which they could do them! More religion, more laws, more bondage, more condemnation, more hopeless inability to please God!

When we read these instructions, we need to read them in the light of what we have already seen in those earlier chapters, perhaps especially **Romans 8:1-17**, where Paul has spelled out very clearly the fact that **we are completely unable to please God by our own natural ability**, but that the Holy Spirit is at work in us "so that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to flesh but according to Spirit" (**Romans 8:4**). This is in line with what Paul also wrote to the Galatians: "walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh" (**Galatians 5:16**) and also the difference between the **works** of the flesh and the **fruit** of the Spirit (**Galatians 5:19-25**). This is all a continuation of being transformed by the renewing of our mind, so that we may **prove in practice** the 'good and acceptable and perfect' will of God (**Romans 12:2**).

Subjection to governing authorities (Romans 13:1-7). Paul's own life, and the lives of Peter and John, demonstrate the balance between this basic principle and the times when they stood up **against** man-made authority when it stood in the way of the truth of the gospel. See Peter and John in **Acts 4:18-20** and **5:27-32 & 40-42** and Paul in **Acts 16:35-39** and repeatedly in connection with his arrest and imprisonment in **Acts 22-26**. Also the Lord's own comments about the right attitude to Caesar in **Matthew 22:15-22, Mark 12:13-17 & Luke 20:20-26** and Peter's comments in **1 Peter 4:15-16**. None of them were rebellious against human authority (which is the point of what Paul is writing here) but each one was very clear about God's authority being a much higher priority! Paul's readers in Rome may have heard of his occasional 'brushes' with authority and, within a few years, would find him there in their midst as a prisoner awaiting trial!

Paul mentions 'condemnation', 'fear' and 'wrath' a few times in these verses, but makes the point in **v.5** that our 'being in subjection' to authority is not just a case of being afraid of the anger of rulers, but also 'for conscience' sake'. He is very clear about the need to be subject to rulers because the source of their authority is God himself. The Caesar to whom Paul appealed (**Acts 25:11**) was Nero himself – not known for his good treatment of Christians!

Love in practice as the fulfilment of the demands of law (Romans 13:8-10). Having just written about paying what is due to those in authority (tax, revenue, fear and honour – **v.7**), he follows this with **not owing anything to anyone** – except the 'debt' of sacrificial love. Just as the Lord Jesus had done years before ¹, Paul sums up the demands of the Ten Commandments which deal with human relationships in the single word 'love' – *agapé*, the sacrificial devotion which goes beyond friendship, family ties or marital love.

It's later than you think! (Romans 13:11-14). Paul and Peter repeatedly refer to 'the day' which is coming, and here Paul uses the same picture to point to the coming end of the 'night' and urge believers to be awake (literally, 'be raised' – !) from sleep, put aside (once for all) the 'deeds of darkness' (i.e. those things which belong to this present world system) and clothe ourselves with the 'armour of light'. Compare with **Ephesians 6:10-17, Colossians 3:1-11** and **1 Thessalonians 5:1-10**. For the same reason, he urges us to behave (literally 'walk around') honourably as would be expected in open daylight, in contrast to revelling, intoxication, sexual sin and sensuality which, together with quarrelling and jealousy, seem to be characteristic of 'night'.

¹ **Matthew 7:12, 22:36-40, John 13:34**

The solution? To clothe ourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ (see **Colossians 3** again!) and continue to make no allowance for satisfying the desires of 'the flesh' – such as the short list in **v.13**.

Paul continues into **chapter 14** with more practical issues which are very relevant to us today – questions of conscience and personal conviction. Again, these all spring from the need for real sacrificial love to be at the heart of our 'walk', and the pressing need for us not to be judgmental about others' convictions – even if we are SURE that they are misguided! (**v.1**)

Vegetarianism. (Romans 14:2-4) Yes, even in first century Rome! Paul describes convinced vegetarians as 'weak' but only, I suspect, because they lack the strong conviction that eating meat is OK. Easy for the meat-eaters to write them off contemptuously, and equally easy for the vegetarians to be judgmental about the carnivores. Both sides of this situation need to watch out, not to condemn the other person, who is just as much a servant of the Lord as they are. The word here is 'house-servant', and the picture is of fellow-servants in a household passing judgment on each other, while the only thing that really matters is the standing of the individual servant with the master of the household. And that relationship is secure, says Paul!

Special Days. (Romans 14:5-6) Observing special days for the Lord probably applied to some of the Jewish believers there in Rome, who might want to celebrate Passover or Pentecost ¹. We can find no suggestion that Paul (or any of the other apostles) encouraged believers to observe special days, but Paul is careful not to write off those who might want to do so, provided they are observing the day 'for the Lord' and not because they are still tied to Old Testament legalism.

"Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind" (**v.5**). Here is the key! Each of us fully convinced, probably sure that the other opinion is completely wrong, but not condemning the one who is 'fully convinced' in the opposite direction!

Paul draws an important lesson out of this: We each individually live or die for the Lord; we belong to him ² and stand before him now. We shall also stand before him in 'the day', when we shall give an account of ourselves to him (**v.7-12**).

And **therefore**, says Paul, we need not to pass judgment on each other any more but rather – by contrast – decide not to put any obstacle or stumbling block in the way of any fellow-believer. The word he uses for 'decide' or 'determine' is the same word he uses for 'pass judgment' ! Instead of a dismissive judgment of someone else's convictions, a definite 'judgment' against causing them to stumble in any way! (**v.13**)

An example of how it works. (Romans 14:14-20) Paul is convinced that no food is unclean in itself ³ (despite his Pharisaic background – he has come a long way!), but he is determined not to hurt his brother who does not share the same conviction. **Verses 14, 22 & 23** make the point: if someone thinks any food is unclean, he will bring himself into condemnation if he eats it.

This is not a case of relative truth: 'your truth may be true for you, my truth is true for me'. This is not about truth but about acting on convictions. There will have been a time when Paul himself, as a believer, would have counted some foods unclean (like Peter in **Acts 10**), but since then he has become 'convinced in the Lord Jesus' that nothing is actually unclean. His faith has grown as he has seen more truth.

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¹ In **Acts 20:16**, Paul wanted to be back in Jerusalem for Pentecost. We don't know why. Was it to celebrate the Jewish feast, or to remember the events of **Acts 2** ?

² We have been bought with a price (**1 Corinthians 6:19,20**). See also 'Who Do You Belong To?' from www.justonecandle.uk

³ **Mark 7:18**