

ROMANS – Study 9: A transformed view of the world (12:17-13:14)

Key verses: *clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature (13:14)*

Introduction – transformed minds

This section continues the idea of our minds being transformed to think in a radically new way that is different from the world's pattern. Remember that this transformation is the work of the Holy Spirit in us as we offer ourselves to God as living sacrifices, seeking to do His will. In this section Paul details the way in which this renewed mind thinks about four aspects of life:

- Our enemies (12:17-21)
- The State (13:1-7)
- Our rights (13:8-10)
- The present time (13:11-14)

QUESTIONS

- How should Christians view the government and our responsibility as citizens?
- Our modern society places a great deal of emphasis on rights. How should a Christian think distinctively about this?
- How can you help to make your local church more like the ideal that Paul describes

A transformed view of our enemies (12:17-21) – overcoming evil with good

In 12:9-16 Paul described the kind of love that should characterise our relationships with one another in the church. In this section he speaks about our relationships with non-Christians, and, in particular, with those who oppose us because of our faith. There are three powerful principles in these verses that should enable Christians to turn our society upside down. The person whose life is dominated by sincere, empathic, humble love (love that is zealous for God above all, verse 11) will live in this way towards his enemies. The three principles are each introduced with a “do not”, but (as always) Paul also gives positive instruction to do what is right. This teaching follows beautifully from the teaching of Christ in the ‘Sermon on the Mount’ (see Matthew 5:38-48).

DO NOT	DO	OUT-WORKING
Repay evil for evil (verse 17)	Be careful to do what is right in view of everyone (verse 17)	Do everything you can to live at peace with others (verse 18)
Take revenge (verse 19)	Leave room for God's vengeance (verse 19)	When you are wronged, do not take revenge, but leave it with God, trusting Him to do right (verse 19)
Be overcome by evil (verse 21a)	Overcome evil with good (verse 21b)	Do everything from good motives – to see good overcoming evil by bringing people to repentance (verse 20)

1. Do everything to live at peace: “Do not repay anyone evil for evil” (verses 17-18)

The Christian cannot control how other people will behave or how they will react to the message of the gospel, but for our part we must do everything we can to live peacefully with others. We must ensure that we act in a proper way, even if others do not. When they do evil to us we must not repay it with evil, but we must be careful to do what is right. When Paul says “*in the eyes of everyone*” (verse 17) he does not mean that we should always aim to please everybody. It is not as if we are to do what everyone thinks is right for us to do, but to do what is actually right (as defined by God's Word), openly, in plain sight for everyone to see. Unfortunately, in a sinful world, others may not always appreciate or approve of our standards, but we must make sure that the fault is with them and not with us. We are answerable to God.

2. Do nothing to take revenge: “Do not take revenge” (verses 19-20a)

Christians must surrender the desire to personally exact revenge on others who do us wrong. This is not to say that we should ignore wrongdoing, or that we should condone it or pretend it is not a problem. In fact, Paul says, we should “*leave room for God's wrath*” (although the Greek simply reads “*leave room for wrath*”, the quotation from Deuteronomy about God's judgement makes it clear that God's wrath is in mind). We can let go of our desire for personal revenge because we know that one day God will judge all men and that His judgment will be perfect and just. Paul is not saying that it is wrong for sin to be judged, but that God is in a much better position to judge than we are and so we must trust Him to judge, not take it upon ourselves. Judgement for sin is God's prerogative, not ours. This is not to say that crime should be left unpunished by the State – in chapter 13 we will see that the government has been given God's authority to judge wrongdoers and reward those who do right. The command is that individual believers should not exact revenge. This is wise indeed when we remember Paul's words in 11:33-36 about God's knowledge and wisdom. In our limited understanding we are prone to making unwise judgments, misinterpreting motives or missing vital evidence. We are liable to personalise issues and take personal offence that puts us in danger of sinning in our anger. It is right that we are angry with sin, but we must turn to God in this anger and leave it to Him to judge, including through the authorities He has instituted. Our prayer for those who wrong us should be that they repent and know God's forgiveness before the day of His wrath.

3. Do everything from good motives: “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (verses 20b-21)

This principle is powerful indeed. By repaying evil with good we can actually overcome evil since we neutralise its effect. Evil cannot overcome evil. Wrong is always wrong and when we respond to evil with evil we only multiply evil. Revenge only leads to

tit-for-tat actions. When a person breaks the cycle and forgives, things really change. We heap “burning coals” on the heads of our opponent. Our hope is that his conscience will be sparked and he may seek repentance. We must ensure that our own motives remain pure in everything we do.

A transformed view of the State (13:1-7) – submit to the authorities God has established

The authorities established by God (verses 1-2)

Paul says that all authority is established by God. He does not necessarily mean that every person who has authority is directly placed in that position by God, but that they can only hold authority because God allows it and that all authority originates from Him, the sovereign king over all creation. Therefore, we must submit to the authorities and not rebel against them. This rule even applies to governments that are ungodly. The Roman Empire in Paul’s day could hardly have been described as a faithful executor of God’s will or justice. Christians should never be subversive or anarchic. If they feel strongly that the government of their land is corrupt, is harming the people or is hostile to God, they may protest, but this must be done peacefully, within the limit of the law of the land as far as possible and always within the limit of the Law of God.

The responsibility of rulers (verses 3-4)

Paul holds up two key roles that the government should fulfil. It is worth noticing that Paul describes the government in both of these cases as “*God’s servant*”. We should not read this as meaning that God uses these people as He sees fit against their own volition. Paul describes the ruler as God’s servant, not as His puppet. A servant does not always obey his master, but will be answerable to him one day for how he has managed those things the master entrusts to him. Those in power have a responsibility before God not to misuse their authority – they are His servants whether they acknowledge it or not, and will answer to Him. Their responsibility is two-fold:

a) POSITIVE: To do good to their subjects

Rulers should promote good and reward those who do good. They have a responsibility to order society in a way that improves the lives of the people. In particular, they have a responsibility to order this world in a way that is more in keeping with God’s kingdom. Perhaps modern governments would do well to put greater effort into recognising the contribution of those who do good and rewarding those who contribute positively to society.

b) NEGATIVE: To punish those who do wrong

Rulers must uphold the law and punish those who break it with a punishment that fits the crime. Paul even seems to allow for capital punishment here, since the “*sword*” was the usual means execution. This would also be in keeping with Old Testament legal principles (although there may be other reasons for being reluctant to have capital punishment in a legal system where miscarriages of justice are common). Notice that Paul describes the ruler as “*an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer*”. The State is the agent of God’s vengeance on wrongdoers (as mentioned in 12:19). Paul envisages the State being fair, honest and just in exercising judgement according to God’s truth.

Paul does not mean that we must blindly submit even when the State is evil or makes unjust or immoral laws. This is clear from verse 3, where Paul shows that we must do what is right first. Rulers have a responsibility before God for how they use the authority He allows them to hold, but if the rulers do what is wrong, we must still do what is right. We must submit to them and obey as long as they do what is right before God, but after that point we may have to disobey. Those in authority in society would do well to understand that they are accountable to God and will answer for how they have exercised the authority He has entrusted to them. For our part, we should seek always to be good citizens, respecting those who rule over us and obeying as far as we can without sinning. If the State reverses its responsibility by rewarding wrongdoers and punishing those who do right, its leaders will answer to God, and Christians may feel compelled to resist the State’s authority in grace, peace and truth. This should never involve violence, but may include illegal gatherings or parades if the State has given them no other option.

In fact, the Bible contains a number of examples of godly people who did not, and could not, obey the State. As Peter said to the human authority of the Jewish Sanhedrin, “*We must obey God rather than men*” (Acts 5:29). When the government sets itself against God Christians must protest, as the Hebrew midwives in Egypt (Exodus 1:17), Daniel and his friends in Babylon (Daniel 3 and 6) and the apostles in Jerusalem (Acts 4:18-20) did in Biblical times and Christians have done in recent decades. There may also be situations where the governing authorities are in a phase of transition (e.g. during a revolution). In such situations Christians will need great wisdom to know how to act and who to obey.

Our response in citizenship (verses 5-7)

In verse 5 Paul gives us two reasons why we should submit to the authorities:

- a) *Fear of judgement* – this rather crude motivation is probably the main reason that most people keep the law.
- b) *Conscience* – this is a higher principle and should be our main motivating factor once we realise that the State is God’s agent.

An example from everyday life should illustrate these two motivations. I should accept that it is a sin for me to break the speed limit, since this has been set in law by the authorities, which are appointed by God. I may obey the speed limit because I am afraid that if I am caught I will be fined or get penalty points on my license, but it would be better if I obey the limit because I realise my responsibility before God to submit to the authorities and habitually keep the law as a result. Christians should be slow to criticise laws and should not think they can opt out simply because they are unpopular (30 miles-an-hour speed limits are a good example). A proper application of this passage in a democratic country should also include a thoughtful approach to voting. If we believe that positions of authority are established by God and we are allowed a part to play in deciding who is appointed to them, we should think and pray carefully about who we elect.

In verses 6 and 7, Paul develops this idea to tell us in black and white terms what it means to submit to the authorities. We should pay our taxes, pay revenue and fulfil any other requirement of the law. It is a sin for Christians to evade tax or to fail to pay their TV license. This is particularly pertinent for self-employed people who are responsible for their own tax returns. We must be

completely honest and take positive action to ensure that we are giving everyone what we owe them. We must not think of the government in impersonal terms (“*I wouldn’t steal from a person, but not paying tax isn’t stealing, it’s a victimless crime*”); we must realise that the government is God’s servant. Would you steal from God’s servant? We must also have an attitude of respect and honour towards those in positions of authority, not just if they deserve it but also because of the position itself.

These truths also have implications for how we view our daily working life. If we are serving the state (or society) then we are equally God’s servants as those who serve full time in the church are. We are all ‘Full Time Christian Workers’! God cares both about our ‘secular’ work and our ‘spiritual’ service, and we must be accountable to Him in our attitude to our work. We must not cheat in the work-place, taking office supplies when no-one is looking, using the photocopier for personal (or even church) use, leaving early when the boss isn’t around etc. We must have a high standard, working for our boss as if we were working for Christ.

Church and State

The issue of how the Church should relate to the State has been a major question for Christians throughout church history. At different stages and in different contexts a number of different attempted solutions have emerged:

- **The Church controls the State** – this situation was common in Western Europe in the Middle Ages, with the Pope assuming direct political control over some territories and exercising control (to varying degrees) over other rulers.
- **The State controls the Church** – this approach is seen in modern day China, where churches must be registered with the State and the State seeks to control what can be taught by churches. It was also seen at periods in church history when secular rulers assumed control over the papacy.
- **Established Churches** – in this compromise approach the State shows favour to the Church (usually one particular denomination) and the Church shows loyalty to the institutions of the State (generally involving accommodation). This approach has been commonplace in many European Protestant countries, and is still the case in modern day England and Scotland.
- **Isolationism** – the Church seeks to have nothing to do with the State and its members take no part in politics. This approach was favoured by the Anabaptist tradition and in modern times is exemplified by the Plymouth Brethren and, in more extreme forms, by Amish and Mennonite communities in North America.
- **Partnership** – Church and State respect one another and encourage each other’s God-given responsibilities. Christians seek to play an active role in State structures without compromising their faith and the State recognises the contribution of churches, perhaps allowing charitable status and tax benefits to churches. This situation has been seen in the USA.

Church history demonstrates that the confusion of spiritual authority with material power tends always to lead to a compromise of Biblical truth or an abuse of power. Paul’s teaching here would appear to favour the approach of partnership (although proponents of the alternative view would argue that he could only write in these terms given the reality at the time when he was writing). Christians should be committed to both church and State, respecting both church leaders and secular leaders, being good church members but also good citizens. The State should not fear a Church that is not State-controlled, and the Church should not seek to take on itself secular power. As Christ said, “*Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s*” (Mark 12:17).

A transformed view of our rights (13:8-10) – motivated by the responsibility to love

In these verses Paul returns to the over-arching theme of love that flows through all of our relationships. He challenges us to love our neighbour for two reasons:

a) Because we have a debt to love others (verse 8a)

We are to leave no debt outstanding except the debt to love. We must pay our debts to individuals and to the government (taxes etc.), but the one debt we can never fully pay off is love. How can this be described as a debt? Surely we have no debt to love people who have not loved us? In fact, we do. There are two ways to get into debt. The first is if someone gives money to you and you owe them it. You must repay them. This is often the basis of human relationships. ‘You scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours’! The second way to be in debt, however, is if someone gives you some money to pass on to another person. In this case you are in debt not to the person who gave you the money but to the person they told you to pass it on to. This is the kind of debt Paul speaks about here. God has shown us His love by sending Christ to die for us (5:8) and He has poured His love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit (5:5). He now commands us to pass His love on to others, including our enemies (12:9-21). We are indebted to others because God didn’t give us His love just so that we can enjoy it for ourselves, but so that we can pass it on. Christian relationships are based on the flow of love from God to us and through us to others. Because of God’s love for us, we are able to love those who do not and may never love us. This selfless love is the foundation stone of Christian ethics.

b) Because Love fulfils the Law (verses 8b-10)

Again Paul harks back to Christ’s teaching as he reminds us that the command to love our neighbour sums up the Law (see Matthew 22:37-40). As we have seen previously, Paul is not antinomian (opposed to the Law). In fact, his desire is that people would fulfil the Law, but he recognises that this is only possible by the new way of the Spirit (8:3-4), which is the way of Christ-like love. Paul quotes three of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20). These are three of the six commandments that relate to our behaviour towards other people. He does not make reference to the first four, which speak of our relationship with God. Christ said that the greatest commandment is to love God with our whole being and that the second is to love our neighbour as ourselves. It is only when we love God and know His love that we can love others. There is no higher principle than Christian love. If we genuinely love others we will do no harm. Paul is not saying that love alone can guide us into correct action without any moral standard. He says that love fulfils the Law, not that it replaces or removes it (see Matthew 5:17-19). The new

commandment of love summarises the other commandments and it is true that if we obey the Ten Commandments we can say we have loved our neighbour, but we also need the more detailed standard of God's Law to be able to discern right from wrong since our hearts can deceive us. This is why Jesus, Paul and the other New Testament writers do not fail to provide us with clear statements about what behaviour is right and what is wrong. There is no contradiction between such teaching and the principle that we live under the Spirit's guidance according to the commandment of love.

I have entitled this section *A transformed view of our rights* because in a world that places great emphasis on 'human rights' we would do well to notice that Paul speaks of responsibilities, duties and debts, rather of our rights. The cross is at the centre of the gospel not simply because it is the way in which God makes us right with Himself, but also because it provides the pattern by which we are to live the Christian life. We are called to take up our cross daily as we follow Christ (Luke 9:23), denying our own rights and living for the sake of God and others. We are living sacrifices, and sacrifices have no rights! In the church if everyone lived according to their responsibilities we wouldn't need to speak of rights and in the wider society if Christians truly lived other-centred lives we would make a tremendous impact. The focus on human rights in the last number of decades has largely been a necessary response to abuses of other people and failure to live up to responsibilities. In this sense it is a testimony to the fundamental selfishness of human beings in our fallen condition. In Christ we can be restored to be people who realise our responsibilities and care more about the needs of others than our own rights.

A transformed view of the present time (13:11-14)

This final section of chapter 13 focuses on the "*present time*", which Paul expects us to understand (verse 11). There is a specific context in which we are expected to serve one another in love in the body of Christ, to forgive our enemies, to submit to the authorities and to love our neighbour. We need to have an awareness of what is happening in this present age and to have a perspective that is determined by what God is doing in it. This is another challenge for us, as we are so easily conformed to the world's way of understanding the present age. Whether it is the fear of global warming and natural disasters, financial uncertainties, job uncertainty, the ageing population, or health scares and the fear of death, our world is a place of uncertainty. The response of many people is simply to 'lighten up and live a little' – to live for the moment and seek pleasure while they can.

The Christian has a completely different perspective on the age we live in. We realise that the world is currently in a period of night, but that the day is soon to break (verse 12). We are not fooled into believing that this present age is all that there is and we know that time is moving towards the ultimate goal that God has set – the time when the children of God will be revealed in glory (8:21). Christians cannot afford to slumber in this dark age. We have a mission to fulfil, a light to shine into the darkness. If we live like everyone else around us then we are hiding our light under a bowl (Matthew 5:15). We must put strip off the deeds of darkness and in their place put on the armour of light (verse 13). We must clothe ourselves with Christ (verse 14). He is the light, and we are His witnesses. This armour means behaving decently, not engaging in sinful behaviour, whether the sins we so readily see in others, like sexual immorality and drunkenness, or those we like to overlook in ourselves, like dissension and jealousy. There is no time to waste, and we must take every opportunity to live for God and to shine His light to others. We must not give any opportunity to the desires of the sinful nature (verse 14). The way to deal with the temptation to sin is to be clothed with Christ and to fill our thoughts and our time with good deeds.

Sadly, we are often asleep in the light while the world stumbles in the darkness towards a lost eternity. To quote a line from a Keith Green song, "*The world is sleeping in the night that the Church just can't fight 'cause it's asleep in the light!*" It is time to rouse ourselves, strip off the bedclothes of selfishness and dress in the radiance of Jesus Christ.

QUESTIONS

- Are there specific issues you need to deal with in light of this passage? People you need to forgive? Areas where you are not submitting to the authorities as you should?
- What issues in our society may require Christians to take a stand and, based on this passage, how should we do that?
- How effective are Christians today at understanding the "*present time*"? What do we need to do to be effective witnesses?