

THE LETTER OF PAUL TO THE ROMANS
Commentary by Rev. Msgr. Gregory Mikesch
Lesson 17 – Romans 12:9- 13:14

Romans 12:9-21

The remaining verses in this segment describe particular acts of love. Paul begins verse 9 with the message, “Let love be genuine.” He then enumerates the many ways in which the virtue of charity can be manifested. Genuine love has no pretense and does not seek self-gain. The person who loves in this way will also avoid evil, not out of fear of getting caught, but because evil is devoid of God. Paul says that the person of faith will “hold fast to what is good” because anything which is good is in some way related to God.

In verse 10, Paul encourages Christians to love one another with the affection of family members. He knows how competition can be destructive, for it ends with one being declared the “loser.” For this reason, Paul wants his readers to outdo one another in showing respect. This kind of competition builds up both parties and seeks the good of all.

Verse 11 is a call to always remain committed to the Lord and to work for the kingdom. There is no room for lethargy. The call to be filled with zeal is not a call to busyness. There is need for balance. The active ministry must always be supported by times of quiet prayer and retreat. Jesus himself needed to get away from the constant demands of the people in order to be in communion with his Father. The Lord is our source of strength.

In verse 12, Paul uses a sentence filled with meaning, “Rejoice in hope.” This is very similar to Philippians 4:4, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.” Paul can be joyful because he knows that the victory is already won in Christ. The “hopeless Christian” is a contradiction in terms. A person who believes that Jesus has risen from the dead is still hopeful even in the painful mysteries of life. A Christian is not blind to the evil and suffering many people endure but a Christian can say, even in the midst of darkness, “The Lord will in some mysterious way bring about his victory.”

Assisting others in their need is also a sign of Christian love. Paul calls in verse 13 for a sharing with the saints, meaning other members of the community or members of other communities. He could be speaking of the collection which is being taken up for the Christians in Jerusalem (Romans 15:25-27; 1 Corinthians 16:1-4). He wants hospitality to be an indication that Christians see the presence of Christ in others. They should welcome those in need as they would welcome the Lord.

The main theme in these remaining verses of chapter 12, verses 14 through 21, is love of enemies. Paul is echoing part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:44). In verse 14, he tells his readers to love as Christ loves by praying for persecutors. Paul could also be recalling the words of Stephen (Acts 7:60). In verse 15, he calls upon Christians to have the humility to rejoice with those who have good fortune and to feel the pain of those in sorrow. Christians are to recognize that everything is a gift and therefore, there is no basis for feeling superior to others.

In verse 17, Paul is aware of the escalation of evil. In its own way, the Law of Retaliation in the Hebrew Scriptures (Exodus 21:23-25) tries to prevent escalation. The injured person could only do to the other person whatever had been done; nothing more. But Jesus calls his followers to a higher morality (Matthew 5:38f). Paul repeats this teaching and reminds his readers that they should seek what is noble in order to give witness to all.

Peace is one of the signs of the kingdom of God and a sign of the presence of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22). In verse 18, Paul is mindful of the beauty of this gift, but he is also aware that truth must be proclaimed. There are times when evil must be confronted. Those who perpetrate injustice and hatred must be opposed by those who seek what is noble and good. The scriptures record the anger of Jesus when his Father's house was desecrated and when he was faced with the hardness of heart of the Pharisees (Mark 3:5). Christians are called upon to live in peace but never to compromise the truth.

In these closing verses, Paul again warns against revenge. He quotes Deuteronomy 32:35, "Vengeance is mine. I will repay," says the Lord. Paul could be thinking of two truths at this point. He is aware that Christians are to be compassionate and are not to judge one another (James 4:11-12). He is also aware that in the final age, God will reveal all things. There will be a final judgment and this judgment belongs to God.

In verse 20, Paul quotes a passage from Proverbs 25:21-22. The commentators disagree on the meaning of this text. Some say that the "burning coals," which result from the kindness shown to the enemies, represent the increased punishment which the persecutors will receive in the final judgment. Others say that these "coals" represent the acts of mercy shown to the persecutors. These acts of mercy will cause them to be ashamed of the evil they have inflicted and they will repent. In either case, Paul concludes by calling upon his readers to let goodness triumph. God who is the source of all goodness will bring about his victory. The kindness which Christians show to one another, and even to their enemies, hastens this victory of the Lord.

Romans 13:1-7

Chapter 13 continues with Paul's description of how a Christian should live. In the previous chapter, he encourages his readers to show Christian love even to their enemies, now he reminds them that being a Christian also means being a good citizen of the state.

We may find these next seven verses somewhat surprising. Why would Paul encourage such fidelity to pagan, civil authority? Once again, we must try to comprehend the mind of Paul. Let us look at three reasons why Paul would say this.

First, Paul is working out of his traditional, Jewish stance which holds that God causes everything. Since the establishment of civil authority is the way society developed, then this must be part of God's plan. And since kings and emperors have authority, and all authority must come from God, then again it must be part of God's plan that these rulers have the right to govern. If a Christian is to cooperate with the will of God, then the Christian must have the proper respect for civil leaders. Notice that Paul does not delve into the particulars of their activity. He is speaking of the need society has for legitimate government.

Second, Paul is also working from common sense. He realizes that individuals cannot exist unrelated to one another. If people live in communities, then there must be some form of coordination for those services which are necessary for a large group of people. Individuals cannot build their own roads, protect themselves from invaders and address other societal concerns without some form of central authority. Paul realizes that the Pax Romana established by the Roman Empire has made it possible for the gospel to reach many distant areas.

Third, Paul has a very practical reason for his teaching. He knows that the Jews have been in a constant struggle with the Roman Empire. The guerrilla fighting of the Jewish Zealots in Judea was a constant aggravation to Rome. Paul also knows that in 49 A.D. the Emperor Claudius drove many of the Jews out of Rome because of the riots they caused. Paul wants the emperor to know that Christians are different. The empire can trust these Christians to be good citizens; they are not a threat. At the time of the writing of Romans, the Christian persecutions had not yet started. Christians are members of the kingdom of God (Philippians 3:20), but Paul also wants to remind them to be signs of God's presence within the civil kingdom on earth.

In verse 1, Paul states very clearly that everyone must be "subject to the governing authorities." Paul does not list any exceptions, but we would be safe in presuming that he is speaking of legitimate authorities, where there is no coercion to immorality. Christians are never obliged to follow immoral laws. Civil disobedience is permitted, but this must be for the purpose of bringing to light matters of injustice and immorality. Paul says that God is the source of all authority. The authority which civil leaders exercise comes from God and is given for the sake of the common good. Jesus himself expresses this idea when he responds to Pilate, "You would have no power over me unless it had not been given you from above" (John 19:11).

Paul takes another approach in verse 2. He says that whoever resists civil authority is opposing the will of God. This will result in judgment. Paul probably has two meanings in mind when he speaks of judgment. The first is that of punishment from the civil rulers. Anyone who breaks the laws of the society must be aware that a punishment will result. But anyone who breaks the laws established for the common good is also breaking God's laws and this will result in punishment in the final judgment.

In verses 3 and 4, Paul presumes that civil authority acts in accord with justice. When authority fulfills its role according to the will of God, then honest citizens have nothing to fear. Paul says that Christian citizens should "do what is good." This implies both the seeking of the common good and the good of doing God's will. But those who break the law must know that the civil authority has the power and right to protect innocent citizens.

In verse 5, Paul takes a step to elevate the moral stance of his readers. He is aware that at times people obey laws out of fear of punishment. Although this can be an effective form of motivation, it is a low form of motivation. Paul wants his readers to be obedient citizens because of the desire to do good. A properly formed conscience guides a person to act in accord with moral norms because of the higher good of doing God's will.

We would have difficulty reading verses 6 and 7 without wanting to say to Paul, "But what about all the waste!" We must remember that he is not dealing with actions contrary to morality. Paul is speaking of the basic needs of society, as human beings attempt to live in a community of mutual support. As Paul understands the nature of civil government, even the paying of taxes is part of God's will. No human action, except that which is immoral, is outside the design of God's plan for his people.

Romans 13: 8-10

The debt which Paul speaks of in verse 7 is considered a public debt. Now, in verse 8, he speaks of another kind of debt, a debt which has a more personal context. Paul says that Christians should always be aware of their debt, their duty, to love one another. He is not speaking in a juridical sense, but rather he is describing the very nature of the activity of a Christian. 1 John 4:20 is a clear statement of Christian love, "For those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen." Paul reminds his readers that if a person's life is lived loving others, then that person is fulfilling the law, meaning the Law of Moses. Paul takes this opportunity to remind the Jewish Christians that the law is oriented toward good, but just following the law does not, in and of itself, bring about salvation.

In verse 9, Paul lists some of the commandments which form the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments of Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5. He says that all of these commandments are summed up in the command from Leviticus 19:18, "love your neighbor as yourself." There are two points to be noted with regard to this verse.

First, in the context of the Hebrew culture of the time of Leviticus, “neighbor” only refers to other Hebrews. It is true that there are laws which call for justice and protection for the “aliens,” for example, Deuteronomy 24:17, “You shall not deprive a resident alien or an orphan of justice.” But the attitude of most of the people is that Gentiles are not considered “neighbors.”

The second point is that “love of self” is a virtue and a sign of mental health. The author of Leviticus is not talking about arrogance or false pride, but about a proper respect for the body, soul and spirit of the person. A person, who sees life as meaningful and basically good, will have a balanced concern for physical, emotional and spiritual health. Paul sees this truth as basic to Christian love. The concern and care that a healthy person gives to his or her own self is the same concern and care that should be given to others.

In verse 10, Paul comes back to the image of the law. The law was a significant part of Paul’s life when he was zealous for Judaism. Something so important at one time cannot be easily forgotten. He now sees the law in a new light. Love for one another is really the purpose of the law and since the law was intended to reflect God’s will, then love must be the complete expression of God’s will.

Romans 13:11-14

One of the characteristics of Paul’s early preaching is a sense of urgency because of the imminent return of Christ. The early Christians believed that the glorious return of Jesus would take place within their own lifetime. In 1 Thessalonians 4:15, Paul says, “For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died.” As the years began to pass, Christians came to realize that the end may be delayed. But Paul’s message in verse 11 still contains a sense of urgency. He says that salvation is nearer than when they first accepted the faith. The image of “sleep” is often used in the scriptures as a euphemism for death. But here Paul is using it to mean “inattentiveness.” He calls upon the Roman Christians to exemplify a lively faith, to live in such a way as to show that they believe that Christ will indeed return to this earth in power and glory.

“Night” is another powerful scriptural image. It can mean the darkness of sin or the darkness of life without God. When Judas made his final decision to betray Jesus, John tells us that he left the Passover meal and went out, “And it was night” (John 13:30). In verse 12, Paul reminds his readers that “the night is far gone.” The time of living without the Lord must be over. The Day of the Lord is near. The Day of the Lord is the day when the kingdom of God will be manifested in its fullness, as Jesus draws all creation to himself bringing about the harmony which God desires.

Paul calls upon the Christians to “put on the armor of light.” In 1 Thessalonians 5:8 he describes this armor in more detail. He says that Christians should “put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation.” Putting on garments of light is also symbolic of the white baptismal gown worn by the newly baptized. The white gown in turn symbolizes the purity of life a Christian is called to live. Paul is urging his readers to live their baptismal commitment and show that Christ is truly present in this world in his body, the Church.

In verse 13, Paul lists some of the sins which destroy the God-life which is to be present in each Christian. This particular verse was very significant in the life of St. Augustine. In his autobiography, *The Confessions*, Book Eight, he tells us that he struggled for many years to overcome the attachments to sin. One day he heard a voice say to him, “Take up and read; Take up and read.” Augustine picked up the scriptures and read the first passage he found; it was Romans 13:13-14. He saw his own life reflected in the list of sins. He heard the Lord call to him to turn away from his life of selfishness and turn to the Lord. As a result, Augustine became one of the great saints of the Christian tradition.

In verse 14, Paul uses two images which are frequently found in his writings. He says that the Christian should “Put on the Lord Jesus Christ.” The same image is given in Galatians 3:27, “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.” To be “clothed with Christ” means to live in accord with his teachings and to let every decision be made according to the mind of Christ. Paul reinforces this thought by saying that there should be no “provision for the flesh.” Remember that “flesh” does not necessarily mean the human body. “Flesh” is anything which is contrary to the will of God. A person who has been baptized into Christ has already died the death to sin. The Christian must be Christ-centered in all aspects of life. This is the life which leads into the presence of the Father.