
The Gospel: Our Responsibilities in this Age

Romans 12:14-13:14

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This has been a special holiday here in the States. We have celebrated our Independence from England. In some measure we celebrate our independence in the world. It will make what I am about to say much more difficult. One of the major issues that has faced us and will continue to face us is, "Will we be more American than we are Christian?" Let me place the questions where I believe it squarely rests, "Are we more earthly patriots than heavenly citizens?" Will we now more shaped by our culture than by Christ and His cross?

Let me place before you what informs and shapes my thinking about this: I am a citizen of heaven (Phil. 3:20), having sworn my allegiance to King Jesus for whom I wait His coming from heaven. I am a pilgrim, a sojourner, a stranger in a foreign land along with all of God's people (Ephesians 2:19; 1 Peter 2:11). We have an unshakeable Kingdom (Heb. 12:28) not of this world (John 18:36) that demands our delighted submission, service and unquestioning allegiance. We are ambassadors of our King here (2 Cor. 5) to represent His authority and agenda - to call rebels to lay down the weapons of their warfare, to join in their allegiance to this King and to serve and follow this King with all their lives. This allegiance means that I will not be shaped by the culture and customs of this world, nor will I be enslaved to its fashions, fads, fantasies and fears. I will encourage you, my fellow pilgrims, to an unswerving allegiance to our King, even when that allegiance calls us to unpopular and possibly, persecution bringing decisions.

So here we are, citizens of a Kingdom that is distant, not of this age and a yet coming King who must live here, now, in this age in this world among people who are rebels against our King under governments largely run by them. So here is our struggle and the clarity of this text: what are our responsibilities in the midst of this already and not yet?

Heaven's Citizens and the People around Us**(12:14-21)**

This is a very interesting paragraph because of its structure and its content. It points us towards serving and not retaliating. This is the private sphere of our interactions with people around us. I am not talking about the right and required responsibility of governments to exercise public justice. Paul is here talking about how we deal and respond to people as individuals around us.

- A. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.
 - B. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be conceited.
 - C. Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all.
 - D. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.
 - c. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."
 - b. To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head."
- a. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

The structure helps us understand the relationship between the parts and how Paul brings us to the core idea. In all our relationships with people in the world around us, as heaven's citizens, as much as it depends on us, we are to live peaceably with all. Why? Because we are responsible to proclaim and pattern ourselves after the King of Salem, the King of peace.

Our Guiding Principles**(v.14,21)**

These two texts define our responses in the face of difficult relationships and opposition. We are to respond with blessing rather than cursing because we are aiming to overcome evil with good. When we face pressure, opposition and persecution, we want to respond with grace, charity and goodness. We do not want our words or our ways to be primarily about defending ourselves, but about representing God.

Now this is not to say that evil cannot be opposed. It is to face evil with truth, to resist evil. But we must do so ever mindful that we are foreign citizens and the manner and customs of this world are alien. We are to speak for God and to oppose evil – but we must never become or practice evil in doing so. I find so often here in America that the words we use and the way we go about opposing abortion and homosexuality – both great, God denying, life destroying evils – our opposing of them becomes evil itself.

One final note – one thing that strikes me in the New Testament is the almost total absence of activism against national, cultural evils. Believe me, Rome had them – abortion, pedophiles, homosexuality, you name it. The New Testament writers acknowledge that those evils are there – but their concern is that Christians be pure of those evils. It frankly, in my own mind, calls into question much of American Christian activism.

Our Loving Practices

(v.15-16,20)

These sets of verses describe for us how we move towards the world to engage it with Christ's love. We empathize with those who rejoice and weep. We may do so in the same conversation. We try to live in harmony with others – trying to establish relational bridges across which to send the gospel. We love and live with a spreading the gospel of God agenda and intentionality. In humility, we cross cultural and economic and ethnic divides to move towards those who are lost without the gospel. As citizens of heaven we must not be arrogant and aloof and distant. We ought rather to demonstrate the humbly joyous self-forgetfulness of our King.

In the context of a true enemy (v.20), love moves to meet their basic need for food and drink. According to Proverbs 25:21-22 from which this is cited, the effect is to “pour coals of fire on his head and to be rewarded by the Lord.” There is much discussion over what is meant by that enigmatic statement. It seems to me that our deeds of good to personal enemies have the effect of making them more aware of their guilt. It is not personal pain but an afflicted conscience and God's verdict that is aroused. Now we do not do these things in order to cause this – the Bible is describing its effect – but rather out of an authentic and persistent love.

Why do we do this? Not just because it is commanded here – but because this is what Christ did in His life here and what God does in His common grace every day. Sinners are God's enemies, hostile to Him, His Kingdom and will. Yet God provides them food and shelter and all sorts of good things in life. Yet, at the end of the day, their very ungratefulness for God's goodness is called in as a witness against them (Romans 2:4-5).

Our Self-denying Prohibitions

(v.17,19)

What we must do is contrasted with and replaces what we must not do. This is wrapped in two clear statements that we need to pay very careful attention to.

We must not repay evil in kind, giving attention to what is honorable in the culture. This is so important. We have an enormous capacity to justify the evil we do to someone else because of the evil they have done to us. We should be paying attention to how we respond to people whose culture is different from our own. It is so easy to take and offense and give an offenses when the customs are different.

In verse 19, we are brought to a very hard text for many people. We must never exact our own vengeance against others. Revenge for a Christian is simply not allowed. This is certainly true in the larger sin arenas – but it is also true in the little, day-by-day irritations and aggravations of living with sinners. Husbands and wives, brothers and sisters, neighbors, work – in all these relationships we strike back in small and sometimes larger ways. God calls us to be patient until the day He makes all things right. And He warns us that when we seek revenge we are taking the place of God, usurping His long patient, high and holy justice with our own petty demands for immediate resolution.

Our Shaping Purpose**(v.18)**

Why can we live and love like this? Because Christians are to be people of peace, not strife. Since this is not our true homeland, since we are here as ambassadors, we are here to pray, proclaim and plead for reconciliation. While we fight sin, we aim to see sinners converted.

This verse also recognizes that sometimes living peaceably is not possible. It will not depend on us. It will depend on others. Others may cause strife and bring personal war – but we must still respond with grace and love.

So Christians are a people who move towards others with blessing (v.14), empathy (v.15), harmony, humility (v.16) and a public willingness to be wronged for Christ's sake. And when the world moves against us we respond with peaceableness (v.18), no revenge (v.19), goodness (v.20) and with victory defined by God's terms and agenda (v.21).

Heaven's Citizens and the Government over Us**(13:1-7)**

In view of our aim to live peaceably with all men and to overcome evil with good, how are heaven's citizens supposed to relate to earthly governments? Now, Paul is writing these words in a time when all Christians would have been living under governments that would not have been influenced at all by Biblical principles. Yet he clearly outlines our attitudes and our responsibilities to human governments as heaven's citizens.

The State as a God Ordained Authority**(v.1-3)**

¹ Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. ² Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. ³ For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority?

The emphasis in these verses is on the state as an authority ordained by God by His power. The imperative then is that we are *to be subject* to the governments God place over us. Why are we to do this? Paul gives us several compelling reasons.

All authority spheres are defined and described by God. Thus God Himself is the overarching authority within which governments operate – God initiated and installed human government after the great Flood. So governments have authority, not by sheer physical power, but by Divine decree.

The authorities that are in place are there by God's design, decree and providential placing. No government comes into place apart from God's sovereign will and all governments that come into being emerge from the decrees of His hidden will.

Those who resist and rebel against the governing authorities resist and rebel against God. When we resist and rebel against God, we are subject to the correcting and judging hand of God.

So, Christians are to do good and not evil. Good governments will support and defend its good citizens and restrain and punish its bad ones. Bad governments may not function as they were designed to by God, but that does not give Christians the right to do evil just because the government is bad. Do we trust in our God or do we not? Will we live as citi-

zens of heaven here where we fully expect that fallenness and sin will twist the good design of God into dangerous and despicable powers?

Now it is imperative that this text not be made to stand alone. No authority may command or compel a Christian to disobey God. So Peter and Paul and a long host of Christians have stood before evil rulers and declared that they must obey God. But they were submissive as they bore with joy the punishments meted out, seeing the suffering and martyrdom as a privilege. So while at times we must disobey when ordered to do evil, we will be submissive as we humbly accept the persecution that comes.

The State as a God Employed Servant

(v.4-7)

Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, ⁴ for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. ⁵ Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. ⁶ For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. ⁷ Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.

The emphasis in these verses is on the state as a servant employed by God for His purposes. God has designed the state to carry out certain functions. When the state operates within these functions, they serve God's purpose and the good of their citizens. When they do not, then they can become a danger to a people. One of the primary functions of government is to implement justice and to carry the sword. The state is to punish evildoers even up to capital punishment. It is to carry the sword of public justice. War is a legitimate function of carrying the sword. So Christians who were converted while in the Roman army could stay in the army and fight for Rome. In fact, Paul in verse 4, sees the bearing of the sword by the state as a weapon of God's own wrath. This draws from a rich variety of texts in the Old Testament prophets where God used foreign and evil nations to execute His justice and wrath against both His own people and against other nations.

I want to point out again that Paul is writing under a horribly evil government and to people under a horribly evil government. We cannot therefore say from verse 4 that governments that do not serve God's good are illegitimate and not to be submitted to and possibly even overthrown. So, we are to be subject to the governing authorities, not just to maintain a clear conscience before God, but also not to put ourselves in the way of God's wrath.

Finally, Paul gives illustrative examples of areas where we may be tempted to respond wrongly to the state. We are to pay our taxes. We are to respect our leaders. We are to honor the government, not because government is of the people, by the people and for the people – but because government is of God, for His purposes and our good. Government is not by the consent of the governed, but by the ordination of God.

Now there is no way to answer all the “what if...” scenarios people can come up with – what about a German Christian under Hitler? What about Christians in the Sudan or in Iraq? Should Christians have been involved in the American Revolution? I want to suggest that while we go to great lengths in our churches and religious schools to teach God and America – we do not equip ourselves for the very responsibilities and responses that actu-

ally do honor God. We have not even begun to explore that text in Timothy that tells us we ought to pray for governing authorities so that we may lead quiet and peaceable lives. What I want to plead for this morning is that we stop being primarily Americans and that we primarily be Christians who live in America – that we affirm our allegiance to heaven and our love for others and our submission to the government placed over us by God’s wise and good providences.

Heaven’s Citizens and the Lifestyle required of Us (13:8-14)

Paul’s transitions are lovely in their neatness. We owe honor, respect and taxes to government, but the debt to love is always to be outstanding. That love is expressed in a walk with God in purity and holiness.

Its Law Fulfilling Love (v.8-10)

Notice how this paragraph is bracketed by love as fulfilling the Law.

⁸ Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. ⁹ For the commandments, “You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,” and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” ¹⁰ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.

He begins with the person in view – the one who loves fulfills the Law. He closes with the principle in view – love is the fulfillment of the Law. All that the 2nd table of the Law requires would be met by those who loved their neighbor out of love for God.

Now I see two very important implications:

Love and holiness are inseparable if not indistinguishable. God does not have to think about keeping the Law. He loves in such a way that all His interactions within Himself and with others is absolutely holy. So there is no such thing as true love that is impure or unholy. People may fornicate, live together or commit adultery – but by definition what they do cannot be loving because it is unholy.

Love is more than a motivation to do what is right – it is very doing of what is right. This is why Paul can say, “all that matters is faith working by love”. Though love has an emotional component, it is primarily thinking and wanting what God thinks and wants for God and for others.

Holiness without love is a sham. Love without holiness is a lie. This is why the Pharisees and all like them are so dangerous. It is possible to appear pleasing to God while not having and living holiness *the way God does*. Thus, it is hypocritical and harmful.

So heaven’s citizens live in earth’s fallenness as people who love and whose love looks like holiness.

Its Eschatological Urgency

(v.11-12)

All that we have learned is about being heaven's citizens has an urgency driven by the already and not yet.

¹¹ Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. ¹² The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.

There is an urgency to the need for wakefulness (v.11) and holiness (v.13) because our final salvation is nearer now than when we became heaven's citizens.

The primary function of eschatology - its teaching and its hearing is that we might be a holy people. When we know that the King is near and the time is short and all that we tend to prize in this world will soon vanish, then what kind of people ought we to be? A people marked by a holy urgency.

Its Christ-Centered Purity

(v.13-14)

So while the day is dawning but not yet here, let us live as children of that light.

¹³ Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. ¹⁴ But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

The word *walk* here is what we would call *lifestyle*. May our lives be characterized by the light of heaven's kingdom and not the darkness of sin's domain.

He describes what that domain is like - sensual, sexual, self-indulgent, strife, self-seeking and self-serving. Not just in occasional passing deeds, but in characteristic ways of living. So heaven's citizens lifestyles are to be in marked contrast to those of the world. We all agree that we should not be wrapped up in sensuality and sexual profligacy. But are our lifestyles marked by conflict and covetousness? Moi? Us? Christians? No, never!

But we are to put on Christ and not provide for fleshly lusts.

Here the positive is stated first. Paul uses this construct to remind us that those who have been placed into Christ have put on Christ (Galatians 3:27) who is the new self in whose image we are being renewed day by day (Ephesians 4:24; Colossians 3:10). In other words Christians are to be becoming what they are - we are being transformed into the image of Christ having been placed into union with Him and having been clothed in Him, His righteousness.

Then we have the responsibility to identify our wants, cravings, inward ruling desires - our heart idols, adulteries and masters - as well as our bodily vulnerabilities and habitual responses and do not provide for opportunities for them to be fulfilled. This is Romans 6 - you are dead to sin and so stop presenting yourself and yielding yourself to its control. You begin by serving your desires until you become the slave of your desires. The gospel and the power of the cross and resurrection comes to free us - so do not reenter that slavery.

The particulars of how a Christian obeys verse 14 are unique and different among believers. Some will have to guard against some things quite carefully that seem to have almost

no affect on others. So while attitudes and actions of sin are sin for all, the particular ways we have of being made in Christ's image and the details of how we guard against sin varies greatly. It is sad that we become more caught up in those details, than in encouraging, equipping and exhorting one another in what is truly vital.

Reflect and Respond

What a humble, holy, wise, loving, gentle, generous, submissive and heavenward longing band are these pilgrims, these foreigners, these citizens of God's Kingdom. Will you join them? If you have, will you be like them now until the King comes?