

### **Romans 1:18-3:20**

The best summary of this long section is supplied by Paul himself as he moves into a new phase of his argument: "For there is no distinction; since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (3:22b-23). When Paul says, "all," he means that Jews no less than Gentiles stand in need of God's gracious gift of justification. How, then, justification comes about—namely, "by faith"—and what justification means are important themes from Rom 3:21 through 8:39; and 1:18-3:20 provides an introduction to this whole discussion.

Put briefly, 1:18-3:20 stresses the need of all people for the saving grace of God. In 1:18-32, Paul denounces the wickedness of the Gentiles in terms and with arguments that were the stock in trade of much Hellenistic Judaism (e.g., the apocryphal Wisdom of Solomon). Although God's sovereign power was evident to the Gentiles in the created order, they turned away from God, attempting to exist apart from God, and chose to worship gods of their own making. They are therefore without excuse for their refusal to acknowledge their true Creator and Lord. In consequence, God has now been "revealed" to them through God's wrath (1:18), and the specific evidences of this are the vices typical of Gentile society, as Jews commonly assessed it, these vices being themselves the punishments appropriate to the idolatries committed.

But Paul's condemnation of the Gentiles in 1:18-32 is only preludial to Rom 2:1-3:20, where he argues that the Jews, also, are sinners before God. Because they presume that they are justified by doing what the law requires (e.g., 3:20), they, too, are guilty of trying to live by their own devices. So Paul can conclude that all people, "both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin" (3:9). This is why God has acted in Christ to reconcile God's people to Godself, and the good news that this is so is the very gospel for which Paul has been made an apostle. The redemptive grace of God in Christ is the one great theme of all of Paul's letters and the fundamental theological basis of all his ethical teaching.

So Paul repeats the standard Jewish accusations against the Gentiles (1:18-32) so as to be able to say respecting the Jews, "they are no better," and to stress that *all* stand in the need of God's grace (2:1-3:20).

**Romans 1:18-32**

Although the word "sin" occurs nowhere in this passage, the taproot of sin is nonetheless described there. It is the refusal to acknowledge the true source and meaning of one's existence, and therefore the failure to acknowledge the grace and the claim under which one's whole life stands. When Paul refers to homosexual behavior, he is illustrating the wretchedness of the human condition where there has been no acknowledgement that life is God's gift and that one's existence stands always under God's claim. To Paul, such behavior represents a rebellion against the Creator and the creation, a surrender to one's own lusts, the debasement of one's own true identity, and the exploitation of another's. But, for Paul, neither homosexual practice nor heterosexual promiscuity nor any other specific vice is ever identified as such with "sin." In his view, the fundamental sin from which all particular evils derive is idolatry, worshipping what is created rather than the Creator, be that a wooden idol, an ideology, a religious system, or some particular moral code.

**Romans 12: 1 f.**

This is one of Paul's most fundamental appeals and serves to link the theological argumentation of Romans 1-11 to the ethical teaching in chs. 12-13. It is written with a keen sense that history is drawing to a close and that Christ's return is imminent. Thus it, too, reflects the understanding that Christians belong to another world, to the one Ruler above all earthly rulers, to whom all earthly powers shall be put in subjection (cf. 1 Cor 15:24). So it urges Christians to offer themselves wholly and unreservedly to the spiritual worship of God. They are not to be conformed to this present age, but are to live rather as transformed and renewed persons within it, seeking out and doing what is good according to God's holy will.

**Romans 12:3-13:7**

This is a series of concrete ethical exhortations framed by the introductory appeal of 12:1 f. and the concluding appeals of 13:8-14.

If the introductory appeal urges Christians to offer themselves wholly and unreservedly to God, by not being conformed to this world, but living within it as transformed and renewed, the concluding appeals serve to

summarize all that has preceded. God's will is love; that is how all the law's commandments are to be fulfilled. The urgency of this is underscored, as in the introductory appeal, by remarking that the Christian belongs, not to the present age, but to the new age. Because "the night is far gone" and "the day is at hand," Christians are to "cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light," which is "the Lord Jesus Christ" himself.

The specific moral injunctions framed by these opening and closing appeals may themselves be divided into two main groups. The first group applies to life within the body of Christ, the second to one's relationships with those outside the church, although just where the boundary between the two groups should be drawn is not completely agreed (12:14-16a being the "borderline" verses).

As for the theological context of these specific injunctions in chs. 12 and 13, it is indicated, in the first instance, by the appeals with which Paul introduces and concludes them. The Christian's present life is radically qualified by the imminence of the new age to which she or he already belongs. But Paul does not conclude from this that those who "in Christ" belong to the new age no longer have any responsibilities in and for the present age. On the contrary, his point is that the new life in Christ places special moral requirements on the believer. The power of the new age is already evident in the gifts with which the members of Christ's body have been individually endowed (12:3-8). These gifts are not to be put on display as trophies of one's salvation (this being the Corinthian error), but are to be used for the service of God in the world, being the means by which the believer's faith is to be enacted in love. Thus Paul's description of the spiritual gifts by which Christians are summoned to obedience is followed by a summary appeal to "let love be genuine" (vs. 9a). From this point on through vs. 21, the specific admonitions spell out love's requirements to those inside and outside the Christian community. Then in 13:8-10, the love command reappears in the summary appeal of the whole section.

The theological context thus suggested, first of all, by the introductory and concluding appeals (12:1 f. and 13:8-14) accords well with the larger theological context provided by the letter as a whole. All persons, Jew and

Gentile, stand in need of God's grace. The Gentile is enslaved "to a base mind and to improper conduct" (1:28), while the Jew is enslaved to a law that promises righteousness but actually opens the door to sin (e.g., 2:17-24; 7:7-11). But those who through faith are united with Christ in his death have been freed from bondage by God's love, which is made effective there, i.e., is decisively re-presented there; and they have been brought instead under the rule of grace (5:6-7:6; 8:2-4). The "base mind" is now "renewed" and "transformed" for the service of God (12:2). And the one true "law" is now understood to be the "law of love" (13:8 ff.), which derives from God's redemptive action through Christ (5:6-11), and this is "the law of Christ" (Gal 6:2).

In sum: the specific admonitions of Romans 12-13 illustrate how those whose lives have been transformed in Christ are to become instruments of righteousness (Rom 6:13), wherever and however long it is given them to exist in the present age.

#### **Romans 13:1-7**

What links these verses with their context in chs. 12 and 13 is Paul's concern to show how, even in the "secular" sphere, the Christian must seek to do what is "good" according to God's will (12:2: "to discern the will of God, and to know what is good"; 12:9b: "hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good"; 12:17, 21: "Repay no one evil for evil, . . . but overcome evil with good"; and, finally, in the midst of 13:1-7 itself: "do what is good" [vs. 3b]).

The topic of 13:1-7 is not "the state," nor is its appeal to "be subject" to the state its specific appeal. Although the admonition to be subject opens the passage and is repeated in vs. 5, this admonition is still general as compared with the specific appeal, to pay whatever kinds of taxes one owes (vss. 6 f.), for which the preceding verses are preliminary. Once Paul makes this specific appeal, he is ready to summarize all of the preceding instructions, which he does by generalizing the appeal of 13:6 f. in such a way as to return to the fundamental importance of love: "Owe no one anything, except to love one another" (13:8).

The seven verses in the passage may be divided into four groups. In the first (vss. 1-2), Paul says that the authority of the governing authorities has been given them by God. The next group (vss. 3-4) expresses the thought that earthly rulers properly function as servants of God by employing the authority given them for the common good. The third group (vs. 5) advances a third point, and in doing so repeats the opening admonition, "be subject"—namely, not only for fear of punishment, but "for the sake of conscience." Finally, in the fourth group (vss. 6-7), Paul says that one should comply with the demands of the governing authorities in the specific matter of taxes.

It is to be noted, first of all, that Paul does not speak of "obeying" (or "disobeying") the governing authorities, but of "being subject to" them (or "resisting" them). Thus what he calls for is acknowledgement of the reality of the political structure under which one stands and respect for it, even if one disobeys one of its particular laws, namely, by nonetheless submitting to the due processes and penalties in cases of disobedience.

In the second place, Paul's points in vss. 1-2—that earthly rulers have no authority except what God has given them and that whoever resists them resists God's authority and is liable to judgment—are not in any way distinctively his, but are simply taken over from the traditions of Hellenistic Judaism. It is crucial to realize, however, that these same traditions hold the earthly ruler accountable to God and stress that the ruler, also, is liable to God's judgment.

As for vss. 3-4, the first thing to notice is that Paul describes the governing authorities as God's *servants*. Far from being divine, earthly rulers are here to *serve* the divine, and their authority is to be acknowledged and respected, not because it is theirs, but because it has been given them by God. The other important point in these verses is that Paul specifies the proper function of the governing authorities—namely, to support whatever is good and to execute wrath on the wrongdoer, thereby securing the good of the whole society.

When Paul, then, repeats (in vs. 5) the admonition to be subject, he says that this is to be done for conscience's sake, not just to avoid God's wrath.

By this he means simply that if one reflects critically on the matter—"conscience" designating our capacity thus to reflect on moral matters—being subject to the governing authorities will commend itself as the good or right thing to do.

But the conclusion and the real point of the passage lies in the last two verses, toward which everything said in vss. 1-4 has been leading. Paul urges his readers—"for the same reason"—to pay all the taxes, direct or indirect, for which they were obligated. By doing so, they will not only avoid the punishment that the authorities, as God's servants, are authorized to administer, but also act according to conscience, doing the good or right thing and thereby signifying their respect for law and order.

In sum: other texts (e.g., 1 Cor 7:29 ff.; Phil 3:19 f.) as well as the immediate context of 13:1-7 (in 12:1 f. and 13:8-14) articulate the fundamental Pauline principle that Christians belong to another "commonwealth" and that their ultimate allegiance is to God alone, whose will they are to seek out and do as transformed and renewed persons, no longer conformed to this present world. But, contrary to what may appear to be the case, there is nothing said or implied in Rom 13:1-7 that repeals or compromises this fundamental principle. Far from saying or implying that Christians belong to their rulers in some ultimate sense, Paul makes it clear that these rulers themselves are dependent upon God and exist to serve what may be accounted good according to God's will. And in this connection, Paul's reference to the role of conscience is crucial; for not only the external restraints and sanctions of the governing authorities come into play in one's subjection of oneself to them, but also one's own capacity for critical reflection and judgment of what is "good."

#### **Galatians 3:27 f.**

Baptism into Christ means that all worldly distinctions become irrelevant. What is important before God is not whether one is Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female. What is important, above all, is that one is "in Christ" and has "put Christ on." Paul does not presume that worldly distinctions are erased. As a Christian, one necessarily retains one's ethnicity (Jew, Greek) and sexuality (male, female), as well as one's legal status (slave,

free). But "in Christ" it does not matter that one is a slave, because "in Christ" one's social class is of no more consequence than one's race or sex.

### **1 Corinthians 6:1-11**

Implicit in the argument of these verses is Paul's conviction that Christians do not ultimately belong to this world. Although they are for the present *in* this world (see 5:10), they are not *of* it. The world is not to judge them; indeed, because they are God's people, the world is in a sense to be judged by them (6:2). Those who belong to the world are "unbelievers" (6:6) and "unrighteous persons" (6:9); Christians, on the contrary, are "saints," people set apart for the service of God (6:1, 2). The question, "Don't you know that unrighteous persons will not get into God's kingdom?" (6:9a), simply emphasizes the distinction implicit in the preceding discussion. On the one hand are the "saints" who belong to God's kingdom even while they are in this world; on the other hand are the "unbelievers" or "unrighteous persons" who are not only in this world but belong to it, insofar as they submit to its claims and not to God's. In 6:9b-10, then, to make this point more concrete, Paul offers a list of unrighteous types, examples of those who belong to this world instead of to God's kingdom. He uses similar lists in 1 Cor 5:10 f.; Gal 5:19 ff.; and Rom 1:29 ff. But none is offered as a definitive formulation of all, or even of the chief, evils that Christians are to avoid. They are intended to be exemplary only, illustrating the kind and range of vices that Paul deems incompatible with the ways in Christ that he teaches in all his churches.

### **1 Corinthians 7:29 ff.**

Paul's point is that no ultimate value is to be placed on worldly institutions or relationships. No mundane responsibility, however noble or important in this present age, should be allowed to make an absolute claim upon the Christian. Paul is not denying the *importance* of the responsibilities that worldly existence entails, but he is denying their *ultimacy*. He is saying, in effect, that the Christian does not finally belong to this world, but exists within it, always under a higher claim.

**Philippians 3: 19 f.**

Paul reminds the Philippians that the "state" (or "commonwealth") to which Christians belong "is in heaven," whence they "await a Savior," their one true "Lord Jesus Christ." They are thus distinguished from those who have their "minds set on earthly things."