



ROMANS: WEEK V

STEVE WATSON | DAILY BIBLE GUIDE | 2016

Previously, in Romans: *Paul's been discussing the irony of what looks like growing Gentile connection to God and growing Jewish disconnection from God.*

Monday, March 14 – Romans 11:1-12

¹ I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. ² God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. Do you not know what the scripture says of Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel? ³ “Lord, they have killed your prophets, they have demolished your altars; I alone am left, and they are seeking my life.” ⁴ But what is the divine reply to him? “I have kept for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal.” ⁵ So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace. ⁶ But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace would no longer be grace.

⁷ What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened, ⁸ as it is written,

“God gave them a sluggish spirit,
eyes that would not see
and ears that would not hear,
down to this very day.”

⁹ And David says,

“Let their table become a snare and a trap,
a stumbling block and a retribution for them;
¹⁰ let their eyes be darkened so that they cannot see,
and keep their backs forever bent.”

¹¹ So I ask, have they stumbled so as to fall? By no means! But through their stumbling salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous. ¹² Now if their stumbling means riches for the world, and if their defeat means riches for Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean!

Points of Interest:

- ‘Has God rejected his people’ – You’ll remember that in Chapter 9, Paul suggested this was God’s prerogative, that he’s free to have mercy on whomever he’ll have mercy. But what does this mean for the faithfulness and righteousness of God that’s central to the message of Romans?
- ‘I myself am an Israelite’ – Exhibit A is Paul, a Jew himself. So that’s at least one person in Abraham’s Jewish family who’s still turning toward God as revealed in Jesus.

- 'seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal' – Exhibit B is a recasting of an old Jewish story from I Kings 19. Elijah is very depressed and feels entirely alone. God has him rest and eat and gives him an experience of feeling God close to him. Then one of the ways God reassures him is by telling him there are 7,000 other people who, like Elijah, have been faithful to God. He is not alone. Paul himself has felt angst and pressure over the rejection of Jesus by so many of his fellow Jews. Similarly, though, he is not alone. There are many other Jewish followers of Jesus.
- 'it is by grace' – What explains this minority response to Jesus? Why do some find Jesus to be good and true, and others don't? Does it speak to something superior in their intellect or morality? Nope, it's just kindness, just grace.
- 'the rest were hardened' – If grace explains those that *have* responded to God, what about those that haven't? I find Paul's implications troubling. Recalling language from Chapter 9 again, he says they were closed off to God and implies that God caused this to happen. The quotations are a mash-up of Deuteronomy 29:4 and Isaiah 29:10, and then an excerpt from Psalm 69. In its original context, the Psalm speaks of David's enemies as the enemies of God. Here Paul makes the surprising interpretive move of applying that line to people who saw themselves as God's chosen.
- 'have they stumbled so as to fall?' – So I confess to not fully following Paul's logic here. But it's something like this. Many, but not all, of Paul's fellow Jews were resistant to the good news of Jesus. They were looking for God, but didn't think God would look like Jesus, so they missed it. Maybe this is even partly God's fault. Why? Because he wanted to evict them from the neighborhood and give their spot to the Gentiles? Well, not exactly. Somehow, their fall left room for the Gentiles' rise. Now that they see Gentiles enjoying the full favor of God, they will be jealous and come back and that will be even better!

We'll break here before reaching the end of Paul's logic, but for now, it feels like he's devising an explanation for this part of God's story that troubles him. It's like he's excited for the growing number of new in-laws and adoptees at God's family reunion but sad over the long-time family members that don't come around anymore. So he finds a way of explaining their temporary absence, even while he looks forward to a day when they'll return.

Taking It Home:

For you – Let's take the logic of this passage in a different direction. Has any part of you been hardened toward God? Disinterested in or even resistant to God's guidance? Without worrying about why this is so, ask God to bring something good even out of this hardening. And pray that in this area, God will give you hope and receptivity to him again.

For your church/city – Pray for people in your city, or perhaps former members of your church, who have maybe stumbled in faith and lost it. Pray that Jesus would give life to many former churchgoers and going-through-the-motions current churchgoers as well.

Previously, in Romans: *Paul's writing to two cultures and religions in these house churches – Jewish followers of Jesus, and Gentile newcomers to God's goodness in Jesus. And Paul's taking a stab at the big story God's writing for both groups, one that he hopes will eventually include a shared connection to God.*

Tuesday, March 15 – Romans 11:13-24

¹³ Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I glorify my ministry ¹⁴ in order to make my own people jealous, and thus save some of them. ¹⁵ For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead! ¹⁶ If the part of the dough offered as first fruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy; and if the root is holy, then the branches also are holy.

¹⁷ But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, a wild olive shoot, were grafted in their place to share the rich root of the olive tree, ¹⁸ do not boast over the branches. If you do boast, remember that it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you. ¹⁹ You will say, "Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in." ²⁰ That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand only through faith. So do not become proud, but stand in awe. ²¹ For if God did not spare the natural branches, perhaps he will not spare you. ²² Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness toward you, provided you continue in his kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off. ²³ And even those of Israel, if they do not persist in unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again. ²⁴ For if you have been cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these natural branches be grafted back into their own olive tree.

Points of Interest:

- 'I glorify my ministry in order to make my own people jealous...' – In turning his attention to the Gentile members of the house churches, Paul plays the Greco-Roman boasting game for a minute. The amazing things God is doing through Paul around the Roman Empire are inspiring some of his fellow Jews to turn to Jesus.
- 'the reconciliation of the world' – These Roman house churches might total 50, 100, or a few more people in total. Yet Paul says small at this seems, God is doing something big – reconciling the whole world! Maybe we've taken this historical arc for granted, but think about it. After over 1,000 years, whatever story God was doing with the Jews impacted only a few thousand people in a relatively small area around Palestine. As a result of Jewish resistance toward Jesus' good news, Paul and others are inspired to take the news elsewhere. And it goes viral! God's original vision of light to the whole world is coming true. And when Jews accept what God is doing too, it will be yet another great story of life out death.
- 'dough... root...' – Paul offers two images to explain what's happening with this sudden growth. The bit of starter dough given to God as a temple offering is still special even when it's expanded to feed a family. And the small root of a tree contains the same goodness you see in all its branches. So with God's story – first to the Jews, then to the Greeks. God has always been good, and all of the people who connect with God – original members of the family as well as the latest additions – get access to that same goodness.

- 'a wild olive shoot' – Though they're more numerous than the Jews, from Paul's perspective (and perhaps God's?), the Gentiles are the new kids on the block. Or now that Paul is working his horticultural metaphor, they are the wild shoot grafted into God's tree.
- 'do not boast over the branches' – As a fellow Jew, Paul has told Jews again that they can't claim superior privilege to the Gentiles. Neither genealogical connection to Abraham nor access to God's law they held dear makes them superior to the rest of humanity. Now Paul addresses the much more numerous Gentiles, who were part of a Roman anti-Semitic culture. Just because they're following Jesus and they see some Jews who are not doesn't make them better either. Core to Paul's message, and core to Jesus' story, is that we're all in this together. Culture, faith, and religion aren't meant to be separators.
- 'otherwise you also will be cut off' – Paul's warnings about pride get pretty severe. At least in the olive tree image he's developing, he threatens that these new followers of Jesus can get cut off as well. When I was younger, I think I heard these lines about being connected or cut off from God as speaking to eternal destiny. I don't think that any more. After all, the cut-off branches here are Jews who've rejected Jesus, and Paul's whole point in this passage is that God's going to connect them again someday. I think it's almost more literal. It's about connection to God, from which we can draw life. Live humbly, and don't judge your neighbor, and you can stay in God's kindness. Be proud and judge your neighbor, and you'll be disconnected and experience God as severe.

Jesus himself said that if we forgive others, we'll be forgiven, but that if we don't offer others grace, we can't receive grace ourselves. There's something deep in human nature and relationships and God's law at play here. How we relate to others is integral to how we end up experiencing relationship with God.

- 'how much more will these natural branches be grafted back' – If God can gather all these non-Jews into the family of faith, he certainly can reconnect the Jewish people to his good news and life again. Paul began Chapter 9 anxiously asking about the fate of his Jewish people. He's moving toward a hopeful answer.

Taking It Home:

For you – Are you living in strain in any relationship? Perhaps stuck in resentment or bitterness or superiority? As justified as you may be, ask God for help in letting go of this to free you to give and receive grace and kindness with all of your heart.

For your six – If any of your six are Jewish, pray that they will find treasure in their heritage and an ever-increasing living connection to God. Pray that all of your six would know that God is eager to include them in his life.

Previously, in Romans: *Paul talked about the new experience of Gentiles' connection to God's story in terms of a great big tree God is growing, with many, many branches.*

Wednesday, March 16 – Romans 11:25-36

²⁵ So that you may not claim to be wiser than you are, brothers and sisters, I want you to understand this mystery: a hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. ²⁶ And so all Israel will be saved; as it is written,

“Out of Zion will come the Deliverer;
he will banish ungodliness from Jacob.”

²⁷ “And this is my covenant with them,
when I take away their sins.”

²⁸ As regards the gospel they are enemies of God for your sake; but as regards election they are beloved, for the sake of their ancestors; ²⁹ for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. ³⁰ Just as you were once disobedient to God but have now received mercy because of their disobedience, ³¹ so they have now been disobedient in order that, by the mercy shown to you, they too may now receive mercy. ³² For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.

³³ O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

³⁴ “For who has known the mind of the Lord?
Or who has been his counselor?”

³⁵ “Or who has given a gift to him,
to receive a gift in return?”

³⁶ For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen.

Points of Interest:

- ‘I want you to understand this mystery’ – “Mystery” was a big word in first century religious life, both in Palestine where Paul was raised, and in Rome. Mystery generally referred to insider-access understanding that only the initiated or mature could understand. In Paul’s good news, God is always disclosing mysteries – taking the complex and sometimes unimaginable and wanting people to hear and understand. Here part of the mystery is what I acknowledged yesterday that I still do not understand – why one people would have to decrease for a while, for another to increase.
- ‘all Israel will be saved’ – God is taking care of business. God will prove true to his original intention to bless Israel, and through Israel (not instead of Israel) the whole world. There are people who tie this promise to the contemporary nation-state of Israel, and so argue for its protection and prosperity. Other people say this isn’t synonymous with Jewish people at all, but a “new Israel”, all God-lovers who have been adopted into the family (8:15) and circumcised in heart (2:29). Seems to me, given the past three chapters, Paul’s saying actual Jews – including the many who haven’t responded to Jesus – haven’t been forgotten by God. God has the right to do what he wants to do,

but what he wants to do is save.

- 'out of Zion...' – The Old Testament reference in verse 26-27 is a combination of lines from Isaiah 27 and 59. Here's the extended version of the second part, from Isaiah 59:21. "And as for me, this is my covenant with them, says the Lord: my spirit that is upon you, and my words that I have put in your mouth, shall not depart out of your mouth, or out of the mouths of your children, or out of the mouths of your children's children, says the Lord, from now on and forever." Apparently, God takes "forever" seriously. Jesus the Deliverer will find all the people God loves, including all of Israel. About 1,960 years later, it's not clear that this has happened yet. I'm sure Paul would be shocked that it has taken this long. Paul's faith, though, and ours as well, if we join him, is in God's tremendous faithfulness to promises and in the "beautiful feet" (10:15) of those who join Paul in sharing the good news of God's love and redemption.
- 'they are enemies... but as regards election they are beloved' – Jews who rejected Jesus and his good news messengers might look like enemies of these vulnerable house churches. Some, like Paul before his conversion, were indeed pretty hostile. But Paul says that God sees something else. In these so-called enemies, God sees the "beloved" who he intends to show mercy. This line might have been an enormous help when in a few years, these house churches faced violent persecution from Roman enemies who sought their death.
- 'God has imprisoned all in disobedience...' – True confession: this is another line that I am confident I do not fully understand. God imprisoning people just so he can later let them out? Sounds like beating yourself so you'll feel better when you stop! So more mystery...

But a couple things that I can note. Romans had a concept of mercy for prisoners, but only for those of special worth or status. "Nowhere in the ancient world, outside of this text, was mercy granted in so indiscriminate and impartial manner to 'all.'" (Jewett, *Romans*.) All have sinned, and been imprisoned by sin (3:23, 6:20), but God is eager to be merciful to all as well. This section started in Romans 9 with Paul saying God has the right to choose some and reject others, but here it builds toward a conclusion that matches the rest of this letter much better – that God is eager to show mercy to *all* people. Robert Jewett also points out that this theme of "salvation for ALL" has been emphasized in 28 verses to this point! This hope of universal acceptance by God and salvation for all fits with another major theme of Paul's – the radical equalizing of all of humanity by God!

- 'the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God' – It also gives us plenty of reason to love and praise God. That in Jesus, God is looking to have mercy on all of humanity exhibits a depth of wealth and wisdom and knowledge indeed.
- 'how inscrutable his ways' – And yet how God is doing this is mysterious. Some respond quickly, others are disobedient only to later come around, and the whole project is taking so darn long! No one has ever promised that we'd fully understand how God works; in fact, it would be a pretty disappointing God made in our image, if we could fully comprehend how God operates. And so God's inscrutability can be part of our praise as well. The closing references are from Isaiah 40:13 and Job 41:3. Their use of "mind" and "gift" circle back to the wisdom/knowledge and riches of the praise poem in pretty elegant ways. Job is the book in the Old Testament that most emphasizes God's inscrutability, and Isaiah 40 tells a story of human wonder and the remarkable ways God can

be so good. So these citations reinforce both God's complexity and God's goodness, beyond our understanding.

Taking It Home:

For you – Take a minute to imagine God's mercy being extended to all people, including some people you know for whom that seems least likely. Imagine some people you know who seem especially hardened to God, or especially mean or bitter, being given a shower of mercy and kindness by God. Now imagine God doing that for you.

For your church/city – Pray that our church would effectively demonstrate and announce the love and mercy of God for all people, and that we would be part of a Jesus movement of that good news travelling throughout the post-Christian, pluralistic space we dwell in.

Previously, in Romans: *Paul wrapped up the third section of Romans, praising God for his plan to save all people and include all people in his adopted family.*

Thursday, March 17 – Romans 12:1-8

12 I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ² Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

³ For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. ⁴ For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, ⁵ so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. ⁶ We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ⁷ ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; ⁸ the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

Points of Interest:

- 'I appeal to you... brothers and sisters...' – Here we begin the fourth major section of Romans. I make fun of Paul for his long-winded, sometimes confusing sentences, but when it comes to broader rhetoric, the man – with whatever help God was lending him in inspiration – is genius. Each of the four major sections of Romans has its own introduction, eight sub-sections, and a conclusion. And each develops in its own way Paul's original thesis (1:16-17) about the power of the gospel from a righteous God, to all people, through faith.

Verses 1-2 introduce the last of the four sections, which focus on good news life amongst the bit of the "all people" that is in Rome. Paul is polite in his exhortation, appealing rather than commanding. And as always, we will remember that we are doing two different things as 21st century readers. We are listening in on a particular, timely conversation Paul was having with

Roman house churches in the late 50s A.D. At the same time, we are asking God to speak to us in our times through these words, in any ways they seem broadly and timelessly to reflect the good news of Jesus.

- 'present your bodies as a living sacrifice' – On the one hand, this is a scary image. Sacrifices bleed and die, and so Paul's asking the Roman house churches to match his own sacrificial devotion to Jesus. These sacrifices will be live ones, though, so there's hope in that. We'll want to remember that Paul is speaking to groups, not individuals, and just about all the "yous" and "yours" in Romans are plural. The last time Paul talked about presenting themselves, he told the Romans they could be instruments or weapons or righteousness, rather than wickedness. (6:13-19). Now they're invited again to give their whole selves and community to God in worship. One more note on this: in talking about worship, Paul takes the word outside of the temple or the church where it could narrowly be defined as religious expression of devotion, and he extends worship to all of life, any expression of love for and obedience to God.
- 'do not be conformed to this world...' – An alternative is passivity, to become just like the times and age we live in. There's no call to be different for the sake of being different, but we've discussed how Jesus' good news is radically counter-cultural, particularly in positing Jesus – not self, state, or anyone else – as Lord.
- 'so that you may discern what is the will of God' – The goal of non-conformity, and of the contrasting ongoing mental renewal, is discernment. This is the discovery of God's desires. Paul will have specific ethics to commend in this section, but he says that it all falls under the canopy of spiritual worship and mental renewal that create the conditions for discernment. Keep your spirits connected and your minds alive to God, so that you find your way with God in the world.
- 'what is good and acceptable and perfect' – This is a classic ethical triad, encompassing solid morality, culturally approved good sense, and aesthetic or spiritual value. Paul says that more often than not, God's desires will align with all three of these.
- 'not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think' – If we're all in this together, than one of the ways we aren't to be conformed to the world is in maintaining interior and relational humility. There's both a personal attitude and an interpersonal disposition that is commended here. To my mind, this is as absolutely contrary to our own obsession with status and exceptionalism as it is to Roman boasting and honor contests.
- 'we, who are many, are one body in Christ' – The union with Jesus Paul so richly described in chapter 6 gets more practical. It involves an intimate connection with Jesus, one which feeds humility (Jesus in charge, not me) and releases to us some of the gifts mentioned in vs. 7-8.
- 'and individually we are members one of another' – This union has a relational element as well. Being in a body with Jesus means being intimately connected to the other people in the body too. Paul certainly has in mind strong relationship and cooperation with fellow members of their churches, but perhaps a broader kinship with Jesus followers beyond the house church walls as well. The same gifts given by Jesus aren't for personal benefit or status, but to be used humbly in the service of the fellow members and of Jesus.

Taking It Home:

For you – Worship often involves an element of symbol or ritual. If you would like to offer yourself to Jesus as a “living sacrifice” in worship, consider doing just that. Extend your hands, offer yourself to God in love and obedience, and commit to the ongoing renewing of your mind and discernment of God’s will.

For your city/church – Pray that our church will be well-connected to both Jesus and to one another and a safe place for all people’s gifts – be they of teaching, encouragement, generosity, compassion, and more – to be released.

Previously, in Romans: *Paul has begun the fourth major section of the letter, focused on the practical expression of the life of Jesus in the Roman house churches and in other faith communities.*

Friday, March 18 – Romans 12:9-21

⁹ Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; ¹⁰ love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹ Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. ¹² Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. ¹³ Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. ¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. ¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. ¹⁸ If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. ¹⁹ Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” ²⁰ No, “if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.” ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Points of Interest:

- ‘let love be genuine’ – Fellow members give each other love. But rather than leave the expression of love up for grabs, Paul practices some discernment himself here and fleshes out a picture.
- ‘hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good’ – Paul will flesh out the good to embrace (vs. 10-16) and the evil to resist (vs. 17-21) below.
- ‘outdo one another in showing honor’ – I love this example of not being conformed to this world (12:2). In a society obsessed with amassing personal honor, Paul directs the Romans to compete in giving honor to others. I’m picture speech recognition apps that catch how many times you compliment and praise another person each day. Developers, where are you?
- ‘do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit’ – Like the renewing of the mind needed for discernment (12:2), Paul recognizes that love needs to flow from an energized heart and spirit. On these terms, the fueling of one’s own fire is an act of love towards your community.
- ‘hope... suffering... prayer... contribute... hospitality’ – The expression of love in verses 12-13

sounds like what a community needs in hard times. Certainly hard times were abundant for the Roman house churches. People have always experienced economic insecurity, influxes of strangers and refugees, and innumerable personal and corporate needs. Communities rise or fall on whether or not they express this kind of love when we face challenging times.

- 'bless those who persecute you' – This begins a list of four commands about non-retaliation and two regarding reconciliation. Peacemaking is at the heart of connection with Jesus, living in community, and choosing love.
- 'If it as possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.' – Paul is clear that one side can't make peace. It takes two parties' good will and trust to reconcile. It takes a whole society to forge patterns of peace. But it's part of our worship to actively do our part.
- 'never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God' – Peacemaking isn't weaknesses or denial of injustice. It's putting retribution in the hands of the only person who can do it fairly and effectively – God, not us. And it's recognizing the uniquely effective potency of love to change others and break hostilities.
- 'by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads' – Over the years, my wife and I have taken the end of this section very practically. After all, it's a line from Proverbs (25:21-22), which is a book of pragmatic advice for good living. Unexpected kindness and mercy have proven far more effective in changing the hearts and actions of our adversaries than any arguments, anger, or payback ever have.

Taking It Home:

For you – What in this expression of love seems particularly winsome or challenging or timely to you? Can you make plans for a fresh expression of love in your life? And how do you need more zeal or ardency of spirit to have the power to regularly love this way? Ask Jesus for discernment in the cultivation of a fully-alive spirit.

For your six – Let's have some fun this week. Using these verses as guidance, make plans to love one of your six practically, beyond your prayers for them. Pray that the receiving of your love would have power in their lives.

Previously, in Romans: *Paul just illustrated part of what the love and life of Jesus will look like in the context of community.*

Saturday, March 19 – Romans 13:1-14

13 Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God.² Therefore whoever resists authority 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. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval;⁴ for it is God's servant for your good. But if you do what

is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer.⁵ Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience.⁶ For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, busy with this very thing.⁷ Pay to all what is due them—taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due.

⁸ Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.⁹ 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, "Love your neighbor as yourself."¹⁰ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

¹¹ Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers;¹² the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light;¹³ let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy.¹⁴ Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Points of Interest:

- 'be subject to the governing authorities' – Given Paul's not so subtle anti-imperial message, this is a little surprising. We can speculate on a few motivations, though. Paul's been thinking a lot about his fellow Jews, and at the time he wrote this letter, Jerusalem was a hotbed of political foment against Rome. In less than a decade, this would become a full-on revolution that led to Jerusalem's destruction, along with massive suffering. Jesus had famously urged Jerusalem toward peace rather than armed revolt, and Paul affirms the same basic perspective – that Jesus isn't interested in an alternative political kingdom, with its own armies and borders, but a growing worldwide community of love that lives within, but transcends the power, of nation-states.

Paul might also have a more practical line of thinking in mind, that the house churches and other new faith communities spread about the Roman empire can thrive and grow more easily while at peace with, or even with the support of the state.

- 'those authorities that exist have been instituted by God' – Yet even in this bit on law abiding, Paul is subversive. Roman emperors were now worshipped themselves, and Rome claimed that its gods – such as the god of Mars – had established its authority. Paul says the god he's been talking about – the god who looks like Jesus, the faithful god of sacrificial love, the god who has beaten death, the god of reconciliation and peace – is the only ultimate source of authority. So even while he urges cooperation with civic authorities, Paul says their power is limited, not ultimate.
- 'pay to all what is due them – taxes... revenue... respect... honor..' – The default for good news community living is to follow civic law scrupulously, both to avoid state punishment and to have a clear conscience. But there are limits to the obedience a state can exact. After all, Paul has encouraged these communities to give their loyalty to Jesus, not Rome, as Lord. (10:9) So here Paul says to pay all of what's due, but only what's due. Pay your taxes and revenue, to the extent they are due. And pay respect and honor, but (only) to the extent they are due as well.

- 'owe no one anything, except to love one another' – Debt, then as now, was a common but dangerous problem, and to avoid it was common advice. But the verse before still echoes. Don't owe taxes, revenue, respect, or honor either – give them to the extent they're required the first time around.

By contrast, Paul encourages a constant attention to the love these house church members give to one another, *as if* they are in each other's debt. Paul's take on love for neighbor as the summary of God's law is consistent with the teaching of Jesus as well. In the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus made it clear that "neighbor" could include one you'd see as an outsider or enemy as well. But here, the emphasis of "one another" has these small Jesus communities, meeting in people's homes and apartments, in mind.

- 'you know what time it is' – But do we? What time is Paul referring to? Some scholars read this reference and its paragraphs as referring to Paul's urgency considering the age he lived in. Paul and other first century believers seemed to expect that Jesus would return again within a generation or two and complete the institution of his kingdom. Turns out the details of that expectation were mistaken. Other scholars read Paul's urgency as referring to all time. By this logic, all generations following the resurrection of Jesus have urgency to them – urgency to be right with God and live well, in expectation of Jesus' you-never-know-when imminent return.

Most persuasive to me has been new scholarship that sees the house church worship gathering and communion here. All the references to love (actually "the love" in the Greek) and living as if it's daytime even though it's night evoke the nighttime house gatherings early churches had, where they celebrated what they called "love feasts": the Lord's Supper (the wine and bread representing Jesus' body and blood) over a meal in which all members of the community were fed and cared for. By this logic, Paul affirms these gatherings and urges them to continue mutual love, but also exhorts them to steer away from the drunkenness, casual sex, and conflicts that characterized other late night gatherings.

- 'put on the Lord Jesus Christ' – Behavior that supports healthy communities and is fitting for followers of Jesus isn't merely the avoidance of the worst parts of late night partying. It is this mystical unity of Jesus, embracing the identity and life of the most compassionate, authentic, beautiful, safe, and elevated human who ever lived, our exemplar of the humanity we were made to embody.

Taking It Home:

For you – Do you owe things to the state or to corporations other than love – debt, lies, or loyalty, for instance? If this feels constraining, ask for God's help in reducing these kinds of obligations. And ask God where it is you find community where you can celebrate and love and make visible the life of Jesus. Ask God to give you this kind of community, or give you a greater devotion to and experience of love within your community.

For your city/church – Pray for our church's small groups, that they would facilitate and empower community of extravagant love and safe, trusting relationships. Pray too that they would make visible the love and presence of Jesus in our society.

Previously, in Romans: *Paul's been writing about healthy civic and community life amongst followers of Jesus, saying it's marked by devotion to Jesus and by love of neighbor.*

Sunday, March 20 – Romans 14:1-12

14 Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions.

² Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. ³ Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. ⁴ Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand.

⁵ Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. ⁶ Those who observe the day, observe it in honor of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honor of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honor of the Lord and give thanks to God.

⁷ We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. ⁸ If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. ⁹ For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

¹⁰ Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. ¹¹ For it is written,

“As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me,
and every tongue shall give praise to God.”

¹² So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

Points of Interest:

- 'Welcome those who are weak in faith' – “Weak in faith” is clearly a pejorative term coined by the so-called “strong,” but Paul accepts it for the sake of addressing the divisions in Rome. “Weak” could refer to those with more scruples regarding religion and food, primarily Jewish followers of Jesus who still follow the full Old Testament kosher law. It also reflects minority status in this largely Gentile community.
- 'but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions' – Paul began by telling the majority to welcome those in the minority into their worship. Receive them, include them, commune with them. But this welcome moves beyond tolerance toward acceptance. He specifically points out that welcome when you're trying to argue with and change someone isn't really welcome.
- 'must not despise... must not pass judgment' – Paul names the universal tendency in diverse communities, for groups to find their own position and views superior and to judge those who think and act differently. Paul tells both sides to knock it off, and in doing so, elucidates the meaning of judgment pretty well. To “pass judgment” on another is at some level to despise them. Why is this off the table from one follower of Jesus to another? Because anyone God welcomes should be welcomed by us as well.

- 'some judge one day to be better than another' – Paul moves from kosher laws to Sabbath laws and other questions of holy days. This may sound like an obscure conflict to be worked up about to you and me. But Sabbath observance was a first-order moral issue for Jews, going straight to the 10 commandments. This passage is talking about important religious or moral issues that not everyone in the community agrees on.
- 'let all be fully convinced in their own minds' – The way forward for the individual amidst controversy is to make up your mind. Paul speaks to the significance of developing and paying attention to our own conscience. Morals and issues matter, but our responsibility is find our own way forward, not to persuade, criticize, censor, or judge our neighbor.
- 'we do not live to ourselves...' – I find that vs. 7-9 break the flow of the argument a little, and it's hard for me to fully grasp their contribution. I think they're extending the point of the previous paragraph, that we live before an audience of one. If we embrace Jesus as Lord, as Paul's repeatedly called him, then we'll want him to guide and direct our lives. And so in disputable matters of ethics and religious practice, we're encouraged to practice faith and aim for increasing connection to a living God.
- 'why do you despise your brother or sister' – Paul reminds Jewish and Gentile believers, perhaps in different house churches, that they are family first, different in culture and conviction second. What a powerful way to see your church or broader community of faith – race and class and sexual orientation and politics and style and moral convictions are all important, but they are all secondary to a shared family identity that disallows judgment, disdain, or rejection.
- 'each of us will be accountable to God' – Paul's back to his favorite Old Testament source, Isaiah (here 49:18 and 45:23) to remind the community that all we be accountable to God. This means we can refrain from judgment of others and leave it in the hands of a fairer and more accurate judge. It also means that rejection of others just because you disagree with them is harm that we'll have to account for to God when we meet God face to face.

Taking It Home:

For you – What behavior or convictions in others most evoke arguing and judgment in you? Ask God for faith to trust these people to God's judgment, and try to practice love and welcome for someone like this today, or at the next available opportunity.

For your church – In a polarized age, being a Romans 14 community of love and unity in difference can be a tremendous witness to the good news power of Jesus. Pray that our church will be just such a community.