

CITIZENS

Romans 13:1-14

With all the political complications that are currently in play in today's world, the definition of "citizen" and the requirements of "being a citizen" are multiple and varied. A simple dictionary definition reads as follows: "an inhabitant of a city or town" and a second alternative is "a native or naturalized person who owes allegiance to a government and is entitled to protection from it." The differences in these two "simple" definitions may explain why some people want to let everyone vote regardless of their credentials while others want to limit participation in such activities to those who meet a more stringent set of standards. It may be impossible to come up with a definition with which everyone would endorse. While exact definitions of the word may vary, we have a general idea of what is involved. Such uncertainty with regard to specifics may remind us that it is equally difficult to get uncompromisingly specific definitions with regard to the term "neighbor." Perhaps we need a good parable to help us understand some of the practical implications of citizenship.

Paul addressed some of these practical considerations following the doctrinal or foundational teachings in his letter to the Romans. We saw in chapter twelve his plea that we might "recognize that which is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God" in our daily living. In the present chapter, Paul put these considerations in the context of interactions with governments and people in positions of authority before addressing how we are to treat everyone. How would such "good" behavior appear when it comes from someone who is in the process of having his or her mind transformed from thinking that is self-centered to thinking that is Christ-centered?

Practical "how to" advice on *daily living* as well as *lifestyle* is found in the Word of God revealed to us by the Holy Spirit. In Romans Chapter 13 Paul covered a variety of situations related to how our interactions with those in the world around us should be impacted by the fact that we are in Christ.

Submit – 13:1-7

¹ Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. ² Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves. ³ For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same; ⁴ for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil. ⁵ Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience' sake. ⁶ For because of this you also pay taxes, for *rulers* are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing. ⁷ Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax *is due*; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor. Romans 13:1-7 (NASB95)

It goes without saying that Christians should be "good citizens." What might be some qualities we would expect to see in a person who is a good citizen? [abides by the law, votes in elections, support programs that try to improve the area, pays taxes, etc.]

Paul used the term "subjection" which is simply related to being "properly positioned" with regard to whatever the authority relationship in which we may find ourselves. What Paul had written about relationships to a civil government could be applied in basic principles to those in the church, those who are employed by others, those in a family, or even to people who belong to a service club. All these various social units have an organizational structure that should enable the proper functioning of these entities to carry out their primary purposes.

It is not going too far to argue that Christians should also be “model citizens.” How would you describe a model citizen? What are the qualities that would exemplify a person who might be considered for “citizen of the year?” [provides leadership in bringing about improvements, takes the initiative to help those in need, donates money or other resources beyond taxes to help the community, etc.]

The differences in the first list and the second are that the first list is essentially doing what is required (passive) and the second list goes beyond the minimum and involves initiative.

In addition to his admonition to us (as Christians) to be properly aligned with those in authority in whatever situation we may find ourselves, Paul gave a set of criteria that defines what constitutes legitimate authority.

We recognize legitimate (authorized) authority by the following characteristics: They hold no terror for those who do right, they bring terror to those who do wrong, they commend those who do right, and they punish wrongdoers. We find a similar text in 1 Peter 2:14 regarding the actions of those to whom we must submit. The instituted (authorized) authorities reward what is good and punish what is evil.

Now comes the hard part. What do we do when those "in power" do not act in accordance with the requirements for proper authority? Our position as Christians then must be that we will not confer any authority upon such people (by voting for them, for example) since they do not meet God's standard. There is another way to confer authority and that is by obedience. What happens when the "law of the state" is contrary to the "law of God?" We have been given a Scriptural example in Acts 5:29: "We ought to obey God rather than men."

Does this mean that we are to go about identifying those who have “proper authority” and those who have no authority but are just in “positions of power”? Does this mean that we then seek to overthrow those who have not been properly authorized? The correct answer to both questions is "yes," but not in the sense most people take these questions. For the first question, we are **not** talking about "investigations and spying and snooping and trying to trap people" but we are talking about receiving discernment from God. In the second question, we are talking about spiritual battles rather than physical battles where the overthrow is accomplished in the prayer closet rather than the battlefield.

The Apostle Paul suffered and died because of a disharmony between the state in which he lived and the God whom he served. Out of that suffering he said to “pray for all men, especially for those who are in authority, for rulers and leaders.”

When we are dealing with legitimate authority in a civil government situation, Paul gave two reasons to be in subjection. “Avoiding punishment” is a basic “protect yourself” motivation that anyone could understand whether they are Christians or not. That is not a particularly satisfying reason to be a good citizen since there may be situations in which you could do something and not get caught and thus avoid punishment by those in authority. The other reason (for conscience sake) is more in line with what should be motivating Christians. We do the right thing because it is the right thing to do. If we are not motivated to be pleasing to God in all things, then we have missed the point of what our salvation is all about.

Everything comes back to the bottom line of Christian living and that is to love others in the same manner as Jesus loved us. We see this in Paul's words with regard to our interactions with our neighbors.

Love – 13:8-10

⁸ Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled *the* law. ⁹ For this, “YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY, YOU SHALL NOT MURDER, YOU SHALL NOT STEAL, YOU SHALL NOT COVET,”

and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying, “YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.”¹⁰ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of *the* law. Romans 13:8-10 (NASB95)

It may be coincidence that Paul started verse eight with an admonition to “owe nothing to anyone” or it could be that the following verses can be seen as an “extension” of his comments regarding proper interactions with governments (what we owe them) where he addressed paying taxes and other fees assessed by those in authority.

Some have used verse eight as a proof text to argue against taking out a loan from a bank or another person. Most commentators dismiss this argument as being out of context for the subject matter about which Paul is teaching. It obviously means that we should not “fall behind” by failing to do the “right things” in our interactions with other people. It goes without saying that we should never defraud another person, but we don’t always remember that there is a reasonable expectation for us to actively help each other when we see a need. “Helping another person” might be argued to be a debt we owe in light of the “spirit of the law” that tells us to love our neighbors as ourselves.

The spirit of the law is meant to take us from a neutral position of the letter of the law (i.e., do no harm) to actively helping others and improving conditions in our sphere of influence. Such a step takes us from “*Do unto others as you would have them do unto you*” to “*Love you neighbor as yourself.*” As Jesus illustrated in the parable of the Good Samaritan it calls for us to become engaged in the lives of others.

As with so many things, we can find that relationships can be all over the map as to whether they are healthy or unhealthy. Our behavior toward our neighbors could range from very negative to very positive such as any of the following: Attack, Avoid, Abide, Accept, Advocate. These behaviors are simply expression of the condition of the relationships we have.

Attack: war, destruction, rebellion, physical barriers, hatred

Avoid: distrust, separation

Abide: do no harm, ambivalence

Accept: Superficial helpfulness, crisis response

Advocate: Take initiative to cooperate, build up, interact, love

What are the contributing factors that determine where (on the “A” scale) people might find themselves? Most of the things that come to mind could probably be lumped together in a general description of “differences and similarities.” Perceived “differences” tend to push people toward the negative part of the scale, while perceived “similarities” draw us to be positive. Humans are very creative in identifying distinctions or differences we may have among ourselves. For some, there is no distinction too small to be an excuse for negative attitudes, separation, and hostility toward others.

Books have been written on the subject and debates are still ongoing as to what **are** acceptable behaviors. As Christians, we turn to the word of God to find answers. One of the most concise summary statements regarding such expectations is found in Micah 6:8:

He has shown you, O man, what is good; And what does the LORD require of you But to do justly, To love mercy, And to walk humbly with your God?

One could argue that the second half of the Ten Commandments that relates to our interactions with people could be summarized simply as “Do No Harm” as to the letter of the law, while the spirit of those laws was stated by Jesus as “Love Your Neighbor As Yourself.” All these basic ideas are fairly easy to understand and remember.

Most of us have multiple-roles in life and (with a little thought) we can apply these principles to the specific situations in which we find ourselves. Whether we are functioning as

neighbor, husband, father, friend, or even as church members we know what our God-given responsibilities are and we can figure out how to do these in such a way that it pleases God.

Do It Now – 13:11-14

¹¹ Do this, knowing the time, that it is already the hour for you to awaken from sleep; for now salvation is nearer to us than when we believed. ¹² The night is almost gone, and the day is near. Therefore let us lay aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. ¹³ Let us behave properly as in the day, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual promiscuity and sensuality, not in strife and jealousy. ¹⁴ But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to *its* lusts. Romans 13:11-14 (NASB95)

Paul's reference to the "time" in which the Christians in Rome were living will help us understand the context of the message he was sending to them. Glancing back to verses six and seven, it seems that the main focus was on paying taxes and other fees (customs). The early Christians (both from Jewish or Gentile backgrounds) had serious questions regarding whether they should pay taxes to support the harsh government practices of the Romans. These questions were raised several years before the persecution abuses under Nero had begun. The letter was written around 58 AD which was about four years into the reign of Nero but six years before the intense persecution started.

An interpretation that Paul's appeal to "do the right things" with regard to the soon return of Christ and the dawning of a new age is very interesting. Consider this: If we knew that Jesus was **not** going to return in the next 50 years and knew that we would live to be 110 years old with good mental capacity, then would that be a good reason to delay the transformation process of renewing our minds and becoming more like Christ in our daily walk? Of course, not!

There seems to be a bias in various translations of the Bible toward relating whatever the admonition might be to the future return of Christ. For example, the statement (verse 11) that our "salvation is nearer than when we believed" is assumed in many commentaries to point to the soon return of Christ (rapture) or the end of life of the believer in which the "fullness" of our salvation can be experienced. However, the passage does not specifically make that reference. The passage could simply mean that since our salvation is a process in which we are becoming more like Christ, then we are (should be) more like Him today than we were several years ago when we believed unto "justification" and the "sanctification" process began. If that progression is not happening in our lives, then "we need to wake up and get with the program." The verse that follows (verse 12) is mistranslated in most versions to say that the "day" is still yet to come. However, the verb (Greek, *eggizo*) is in the "perfect tense" which "describes an action which is viewed as having been completed in the past, once and for all, not needing to be repeated." Kenneth Wuest (*Word Studies in the Greek New Testament*) translates this verse as "*The night has long been on its way, and the day has arrived.*" In other words Paul told them that they had lived most of their lives in the "darkness" but now they are living in the "light." Therefore, put away the things that were done in the times of darkness and embrace the light.

Paul was writing this letter to the Christians in Rome. Why would Christians need to be reminded to put off deeds of darkness and to put on the armor of light? Why would Christians need to be reminded to not get involved in carousing, drunkenness, and sexual promiscuity? To most of us, we don't need to be convinced that such behaviors are completely unacceptable. We grew up in a culture that taught us (from early childhood) the basic principles of good and acceptable behavior and we have been exposed to the teaching from the Bible for decades. On the other hand, those to whom Paul was writing in Rome had not had such positive influences and their ideas of what was OK were very corrupted. In addition, the common practices of the culture were such that there was little social pressure to do the right thing. We are seeing more

and more of the same kind of trends in our culture today and it should not be surprising to find that many people who come into the church today will need strong encouragement and admonishment to get on with the transformation of their lives.

For those who have been Christians for many years, we need to guard against the complacency that comes from familiarity with the gospel message and a failure to realize that we have not arrived at the goal God has for us which is to be conformed to the image of Christ. There are still many areas in our lives that need to be brought under the Lordship of Christ that (in many cases) involve our attitudes more than our outward behaviors. We tend to look at Paul's list in verse 13 and think that those initial items of drunkenness and promiscuity don't apply to us but we fail to read the rest of the list and, consequently, we don't see such things as quarreling and jealousy that we may need to deal with.

If we are faithful to follow the Lord as He leads us by the Holy Spirit, then that faithfulness will spill over in all the relationships in our lives such as interaction with governments, employment, church and our neighbors. Following the Lord's leading will also take care of the changes in behaviors and attitudes that characterize the worldly culture in which we find ourselves and we will make a difference for the Kingdom of God.