

THE BOOK OF ROMANS

Lesson 31, Chapter 13

If there was a single overarching theme for Paul in Romans chapter 12 it had to be that Believers should not retaliate when wronged nor seek revenge when insulted and offended. To be clear this by no means is speaking about Believers avoiding the criminal justice system when a crime has been committed. There is no suggestion that if someone physically attacks and harms you that you are to be passive or silent or shouldn't reasonably defend yourself. Or that if someone steals your property that you should not report it to the proper authorities and prosecute the thief. Rather we must remember that the context of Paul's ruling about non-retaliation has very much to do with the Middle Eastern culture of his time that was developed around a Shame and Honor system of society. Do not become confused between the terms shame and ashamed. Shame in a Shame and Honor society has to do with social status. Ashamed is a familiar emotion in Western society because it is based on feelings of guilt.

Shame and Honor societies are completely consumed with their concern for social status; this was the way of all Bible era cultures and that included the Hebrews especially of the earlier days before the Law of Moses. The Law of Moses was an extraordinary move away from a Shame and Honor system because it sought to draw Israel towards a social structure based on innocence and guilt; but that transformation would only happen slowly, imperfectly, and unevenly. So even 13 centuries later in Paul's day while Jewish society generally followed Torah Laws and **Halakhah** (traditions of the elders), and were judged according to guilt or innocence as it came to obeying God's laws, long entrenched elements of shame and honor remained part of Jewish cultural behavior.

Shame and honor societies have their basis in tribalism and thus the people are group-thinkers. That is, conforming to the group and to its ancient traditions is always the standard to be reached. Individualism is seen as rebellion and going against the group and thus it is a bad thing and the person who seeks individualism is shunned. Islam and the Arab world and the bulk of the Middle Eastern societies of the modern era are strongly shame and honor based societies. At the root of Chinese, Japanese, Korean and other Far East societies is shame and honor. Behaviorally speaking the thought of people who adhere to such a social philosophy is much less about acting rightly or wrongly (according to laws and regulations) and much more it is of acting honorably or shamefully (as decided by centuries of customs). These are not wordplays; right does not equate to honorable and wrong does not equate to shameful. Therefore since right and wrong (innocence and guilt) take a back seat to what is shameful or honorable (meeting social norms) this type of society also has less of a concept of personal guilt (at least as the Western world thinks of guilt) and so people rarely deal with the emotion of being ashamed. Acting shamefully brings dishonor to a person; but not a sense of guilt or being ashamed. And this is because shame is not the result of being guilty of breaking a law or a regulation but rather shame is the dreaded and highly undesirable societal status of one who has lost their honor; they have lost their place in mainstream society. Again: shame and honor are definitions of social status and are generally not the result of doing right or wrong; it is not

about criminal activity nor is it about morality or ethics. A person living in a Shame and Honor society is always either in a cultural condition of shame or of honor; there is no middle ground. What shame and honor amounts to is defined by long held tribal customs and traditions and therefore it varied to a degree among the many and different cultures. Thus it wasn't hard for a traveler in a foreign place to find himself running for his life after inadvertently committing some type of unintended insult against a local, which within that particular society brought shame upon that person.

We of the West can scoff and snicker at this and think how ignorant and primitive. But folks, we are the minority; the bulk of the people on this planet in present times live in a Shame and Honor society, or at least shame and honor plays a significant role in everyday matters; so we would do well to understand the basics of how it operates. Not understanding Shame and Honor systems of society, and not respecting their powerful influence on decisions and behavior that rises above the value of life is why all of the West's intrusions into Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, and Syria, and into Israel's affairs with their hostile Arab neighbors, do nothing but muck things up all the more and totally confound Western governments.

By Paul's day God had been patiently working for centuries to wring the Shame and Honor mentality out of His people, Israel. Ironically, the Roman Empire was attempting to do the same by transforming every nation under its power into a society of laws such that taking revenge for being shamed was itself a crime. Yet ancient elements of shame and honor still were embedded in even Roman Hellenistic culture. Why am I telling you all of this? Because understanding this reality of Paul's day tells us what led Paul to speak to the Believers of Rome (Jews and gentiles) about not retaliating and not seeking revenge, and enveloping his regulation against it with the foundational Torah commandment from Leviticus 19 to "love your neighbor as yourself". The Shame and Honor system was alive and well and it went directly against the most foundational principles of the Biblical Torah.

Now as we open Romans chapter 13 we find Paul applying the principles of non-retaliation and loving our neighbor among our fellow man to our relationship with our governing authorities. However I must be honest: I personally find the opening verses of Romans chapter 13 to be quite problematic if we take these verses simplistically at face value as we remove from them the context of the Shame and Honor society in which Paul created these rulings. This is because if we try to apply them as-is to modern Western democracies based not on shame and honor but rather on guilt and innocence they create some of the worst sorts of doctrines and injustices. Thus just as it is critical that we take the Laws of Moses more in their spirit than in their letter in order to transcend culture and time, it is equally important to do the same with the New Testament ruling and sayings of Yeshua, Paul and others. Some rulings and sayings can indeed leap across time and culture boundaries literally and fully intact (such as the dietary laws); but others of them (like the death penalty for adultery and the law against intercropping) must be massaged and deeply and prayerfully pondered in order to properly apply them to the entirely different societal conditions and governmental structures of the 21st century.

Let's read Romans chapter 13.

READ ROMANS CHAPTER 13 all

To be sure we must begin by understanding that any governmental concept of democracy or republic is nowhere present in Paul's thoughts. Even the Roman Empire's attempt to be a republic that was more responsive to the people is a far cry from how we would envision a republic in our day because, first and foremost, these Senators were appointed by Roman magistrates; there was no election. And the Emperor was still considered to be a god and could override any decision of the Roman Senate on that basis. So Paul's world was a world of tyrants, monarchs, kings, and petty potentates that ruled autocratically. He couldn't possibly have envisioned Western style democracy anymore than he could have envisioned the Space Shuttle or iPhones. This understanding must be the basis for how we are to interpret the literal meaning of Paul's *Halakhot* (his religious rulings for Believers) in Romans chapter 13.

However there was an underlying mood of rebellion among the Jews especially among the Zealots (mostly due to their expectation of a Messiah that would lead them out of oppression from Rome), and there was also a growing issue of Believers in Yeshua trying to interweave the concept of being members of the Kingdom of God with being members of the Roman Empire. This is a significant issue that Christianity continues to struggle with; that is, just what role should we allow government to play in our lives? And conversely, what role should Believers play in the affairs of government? The big difference between Paul's day and ours is that we have considerably more say in the matter, even being able to help choose those who govern us and create our societal laws. Thus Paul's first order of business is to say this: whatever government you live under, honor it because God created human government and allows it to function. However the word usually translated in our English Bibles as "obey", which in Greek is *hupotasso*, more means to submit oneself to authority or control. It has the sense of reciprocal obligation (both sides having duties and responsibilities) while obey is a one-way street: the government decrees and the citizen carries it out. Therefore the KJV actually uses the word "subject" instead of obey and so is the much better translation. ^{KJV} **Romans 13:1 *Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God.***

This is an important distinction; the blanket order to **obey** our government is quite different than our positive agreement that we are **subject** to our government and the laws and regulations it creates. It is not the same to understand that our government (any kind of government system) has the right and duty to enact laws and have a measure of authority over us versus when the government says "jump" and our only option is to ask "how high?" Yet how to translate that from Paul's era to ours requires some thought. Since in the West we have actual individual input on who governs us then we have the duty to be reliably informed and to make the best decision possible at the ballot box. However as Believers we need to keep our voting preferences within the confines of loving our neighbor as we think about ballot measures on taxation, schools, public facilities, immigration, social welfare, and the like. We also must constantly think about selecting those government leaders whom we believe will rule everyone equally, justly, and without favor or corruption, according to God's principles of justice and morality.

Let me summarize: the principle Paul is presenting is that as far as it is up to us, we are to have peaceful co-existence with our government authorities, and show them respect even with those leaders we don't agree because God requires it of us. The Prophet Jeremiah had to

remind Israel of this God-principle when they were conquered by Nebuchadnezzar and exiled to Babylon, just as Paul is reminding Believers that this principle has not changed with the coming of Messiah.

Jeremiah 27:5-11 CJB

5 "I made the earth, humankind, and the animals on the earth by my great power and my outstretched arm; and I give it to whom it seems right to me. 6 For now, I have given over all these lands to my servant N'vukhadnetzar the king of Bavel; I have also given him the wild animals to serve him. 7 All the nations will serve him, his son and his grandson, until his own country gets its turn- at which time many nations and great kings will make him their slave.

8 The nation and kingdom that refuses to serve this N'vukhadnetzar king of Bavel, that will not put their necks under the yoke of the king of Bavel, I will punish," says ADONAI "with sword, famine and plague, until I have put an end to them through him.

9 "You, therefore, don't listen to your prophets, diviners, dreamers, magicians or sorcerers, when they tell you that you won't be subject to the king of Bavel; 10 for they are prophesying lies to you that will result in your being removed far from your land, with my driving you out, so that you perish. 11 But the nation that puts its neck under the yoke of the king of Bavel and serves him, that nation I will allow to remain on their own soil," says ADONAI. "They will farm it and live there."

Jeremiah tells us that God operates behind the scenes to set up nations and bring rulers into power and so are to subject ourselves to them; but this is not something that sets so easily with Western Christians, the vast majority of us living in democracies. Therefore in verse 2 when Paul says it is wrong for Believers to resist those in authority over them, it is with this God-principle in mind. However I'm not sure exactly what Paul is getting at in verse 3 when he says that rulers (presumably all rulers) are no terror to good conduct but only to the bad. And that all we have to do as a Believer is to do good and then there is no reason to fear any ruler. I wonder how he felt a very few years later when Nero took over Rome and had Paul executed? Would he have said it is just the ruler's God-given prerogative to burn Christians at the stake simply for his own amusement (as did Nero) and there should be no resistance or effort to save one's own life? What would Paul have said about Adolf Hitler? Would Paul have seen it as the Believer's duty to submit to Hitler and to not resist the government ordered genocide and extermination of millions of undesirables and deplorables? Is it Paul's intent to say that Believers should have aided Hitler in his madness if so ordered, as literally thousands upon thousands of German Christians did? And this because God put him in control of the German government and so Believers would be fighting against God to resist Nero or Hitler?

In fact during WWII this was the official position of the German Lutheran Church and to a degree the Catholic Church as well as elements of other Christian denominations. So were those who helped Hitler kill millions right to obey him? Let me not keep you in suspense: the answer is Heaven forbid! This is why we must never take a few words or a verse or two out of the Bible and make it a doctrine in itself or as the final word on any matter of faith. Listen to a

different viewpoint about obeying the higher powers (those in government, religious or secular, who rule over us) that we find in the Book of Acts.

Acts 5:20-29 CJB

²⁰ "Go, stand in the Temple court and keep telling the people all about this new life!" ²¹ After hearing that, they entered the Temple area about dawn and began to teach. Now the cohen hagadol and his associates came and called a meeting of the Sanhedrin (that is, of Isra'el's whole assembly of elders) and sent to the jail to have them brought. ²² But the officers who went did not find them in the prison. So they returned and reported, ²³ "We found the jail securely locked and the guards standing at the doors; but when we opened it, we found no one inside!"

²⁴ When the captain of the Temple police and the head cohanim heard these things, they were puzzled and wondered what would happen next. ²⁵ Then someone came and reported to them, "Listen! The men you ordered put in prison are standing in the Temple court, teaching the people!"

²⁶ The captain and his officers went and brought them, but not with force; because they were afraid of being stoned by the people. ²⁷ They conducted them to the Sanhedrin, where the cohen hagadol demanded of them, ²⁸ "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name! Look here! you have filled Yerushalayim with your teaching; moreover, you are determined to make us responsible for this man's death!"

²⁹ Kefa and the other emissaries answered, "We must obey God, not men."

And how can we forget the story of Stephen who refused to stop preaching in Yeshua's name at the order of the duly formed Sanhedrin so he was stoned to death....with Paul in full agreement? The point is that the **Halakhah** (the religious ruling) that Paul is making to open Romans 13 has a far greater context than merely the paragraph or even chapter in which it is found; greater even than in the context of the entire book of Romans of which it is just a tiny part. Paul himself refused to obey Roman government officials and so was martyred. When we take the totality of the Bible as our context, instead of a dozen words, we come to realize that while we are indeed obligated as Believers to subject ourselves to the rulers of the nation to which we are part that does not mean that God expects us to obey the humans who rule when their demand goes directly against His biblical laws and commandments.

Paul also brings home the point in verse 5 that while it is all well and good to obey the government for fear that you'll be punished if you don't, it is better to obey because you know it is the right thing to do. But then in verse 6 Paul speaks of the sorts of things we ought to do without question when the government orders it. He says we ought to pay our taxes; pay our monetary debts; and even pay honor and respect to those who are our debtors and to those in authority over us. Whatever we lawfully, morally and ethically owe, it needs to be paid. Goodness how that principle has been overturned in modern times! Let me translate that to you in modern application. Students: you incurred debt to go to college and now you feel buried in monetary obligation. That it never occurred to you that it was possibly an unwise

venture to take on so much debt for an education changes nothing. You owe it; pay it. Those who have heavy medical debt because for whatever reason you don't have insurance but you certainly wanted good medical care and gladly received it: pay your debt whether you think it is more than it should be or not. For those who pay income taxes or any other kind of taxes: pay your taxes....all of them. Whether you think them fair and equitable or not, your government has made those taxation laws and they are valid. And from God's viewpoint the issue of taxation is certainly not one of morality. God has made no ordinances concerning how much tax is too much and in a number of Bible references He made it quite clear that we are to pay our taxes to our governments. Here is Christ's instruction to His followers in perhaps the most famous of those references:

Matthew 22:16-21 CJB

¹⁶ They sent him some of their talmidim and some members of Herod's party. They said, "Rabbi, we know that you tell the truth and really teach what God's way is. You aren't concerned with what other people think about you, since you pay no attention to a person's status.

¹⁷ So tell us your opinion: does Torah permit paying taxes to the Roman Emperor or not?"

¹⁸ Yeshua, however, knowing their malicious intent, said, "You hypocrites! Why are you trying to trap me? ¹⁹ Show me the coin used to pay the tax!" They brought him a denarius; ²⁰ and he asked them, "Whose name and picture are these?" ²¹ "The Emperor's," they replied. Yeshua said to them, "Nu, give the Emperor what belongs to the Emperor. And give to God what belongs to God!"

So here is the bottom line: Believers, Christians or Messianics, we are to leave no debt unpaid whether that debt is to God, an individual, a business, or to our government. That debt can be a debt of gratitude; a debt of respect; a debt of forgiveness; or a debt of money. But the one debt that we should never stop repaying is the debt of love to our fellow man. There is no beginning or end to that debt; there is no time limit in our lives when we can say that we've paid enough love and we can call it paid in full. Paul reminds us that it is THE fundamental Torah commandment to love our neighbor; it is not simply a nice thought. Yeshua affirmed this in the Book of Matthew: **Matthew 7:12 CJB** ¹² ***"Always treat others as you would like them to treat you; that sums up the teaching of the Torah and the Prophets.***

While this might sound to a Christian as though it is the beginning of a new faith creed for Believers, it is not. Listen to this short excerpt from the Jewish Talmud. In tractate Shabbat 31a we find this:

"On another occasion it happened that a certain heathen came before Shammai and said to him, 'Make me a proselyte, on condition that you teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one foot.' Thereupon he repulsed him with the builder's cubit, which was in his hand. When he went before Hillel, he said to him, "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor; that is the whole Torah, while all the rest is the commentary

thereof....go and learn it."

What Christ thought and what Paul taught about loving our neighbor was a bedrock principle of the Old Testament and of Judaism, and not an innovative new Christian doctrine that in time came to be known as the Golden Rule. Let's not miss what is being said: to "not do to your neighbor what you don't want done to you" is simply the negative way of saying to love your neighbor as yourself. And that loving your neighbor IS loving God because He commands us to love our neighbor in the Torah. Working together in perfect unity, loving your neighbor and loving your God with all your being is what the entire Bible is about.....everything else we read in the Scriptures (Old or New Testament.. even the Ten Commandments) is but commentary on those two principles. So however we might interpret a biblical passage if it does not conform to both of those principles we have misunderstood it. At the same time do not ever think that anything God tells us to do or not to do in the Bible contradicts either of those two principles. For example: to think (as is common in the Church today) that executing a convicted murderer as God ordains it in His Word is violating the principle of love your neighbor is fundamentally wrong minded. To think that standing against homosexuality as God stands firmly against it in His Word is violating the principle of love your neighbor is fundamentally wrong minded. And the reason that a large block of the Church has adopted the view that it is wrong to practice a life for a life, or it is wrong to condemn homosexuality as sin or to prohibit gay marriage, is because these Christians don't understand or believe that the root of every commandment of GodOld or New Testament.....is entirely based on love your neighbor and love God. If we don't study and trust God's biblical commands as truth and light then we don't know how to love our neighbor or how to love God; instead every man does what is right in his own eyes and that is sin. The Church propensity is to make it up as we go because it feels better to our personal sensibilities and it pleases the world to no end for us to conform to them; but such a road is leading to the ruination of our families and our societies and dangerously damaging our relationship with the Lord.

Beginning in verse 8 Paul concludes his instructions concerning loving your neighbor by quoting 4 of the 10 Commandments of Exodus; so clearly the Ten Commandments were alive and well in the era of 2nd Temple Judaism. Don't commit adultery; don't murder (meaning to unjustly kill a human being); don't steal and don't covet are the 4. I must say I'm not at all certain why Paul would omit the law to honor your father and mother as it too, of course, pertains to loving our fellow man. It might be that to Paul those who are your immediate family are not necessarily considered as part of "your neighbor" in the common sense of it in his day. That would not mean that family gets less, but rather even greater consideration and love since they are of close blood relation (but that is merely my personal speculation). For many Believers there is always that nagging question of 'who is my neighbor?' Clearly in Leviticus 19, a neighbor is a fellow Israelite...another Hebrew.

Leviticus 19:15-18 CJB

¹⁵ "Do not be unjust in judging- show neither partiality to the poor nor deference to the mighty, but with justice judge your neighbor. ¹⁶ "Do not go around spreading slander among your people, but also don't stand idly by when your neighbor's life is at stake; I am ADONAI.

¹⁷ ***"Do not hate your brother in your heart, but rebuke your neighbor frankly, so that you won't carry sin because of him.***

¹⁸ ***Don't take vengeance on or bear a grudge against any of your people; rather, love your neighbor as yourself; I am ADONAI.***

So loving your neighbor as it was originally given meant to love a fellow Hebrew of any tribe. However by Yeshua's day the tribal system among Hebrews was nearly dead and mostly an ancient memory that had more to do with biblical prophesy and certain birthrights given to descendants of certain tribes. For instance: the Messiah had to come from the tribe of Judah, and Priests had to come from the tribe of Levi. Thus because tribalism had little bearing on the Jews any longer, and because God included gentile membership in the Covenants with Israel provided those gentiles trusted in Yeshua as Lord and Savior, then we find Christ clearly expanding the definition of "neighbor" beyond physical, fleshly or national Israel.

Luke 10:25-37 CJB

²⁵ ***An expert in Torah stood up to try and trap him by asking, "Rabbi, what should I do to obtain eternal life?"*** ²⁶ ***But Yeshua said to him, "What is written in the Torah? How do you read it?"***

²⁷ ***He answered, "You are to love ADONAI your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength and with all your understanding; and your neighbor as yourself."*** ²⁸ ***"That's the right answer," Yeshua said. "Do this, and you will have life."***

²⁹ ***But he, wanting to justify himself, said to Yeshua, "And who is my 'neighbor'?"*** ³⁰ ***Taking up the question, Yeshua said: "A man was going down from Yerushalayim to Jericho when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him naked and beat him up, then went off, leaving him half dead.***

³¹ ***By coincidence, a cohen was going down on that road; but when he saw him, he passed by on the other side.*** ³² ***Likewise a Levi who reached the place and saw him also passed by on the other side.*** ³³ ***"But a man from Shomron who was traveling came upon him; and when he saw him, he was moved with compassion.***

³⁴ ***So he went up to him, put oil and wine on his wounds and bandaged them. Then he set him on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him.*** ³⁵ ***The next day, he took out two days' wages, gave them to the innkeeper and said, 'Look after him; and if you spend more than this, I'll pay you back when I return.'***

³⁶ ***Of these three, which one seems to you to have become the 'neighbor' of the man who fell among robbers?"*** ³⁷ ***He answered, "The one who showed mercy toward him."*** ***Yeshua said to him, "You go and do as he did."***

I also want you to notice something else significant about this passage from Luke. A Torah teacher (by definition a Pharisee) immediately answered Yeshua's question about eternal life

by quoting the dual underlying principles of Torah of loving your neighbor and loving God. Yeshua commended him on being correct. Remember that a Torah teacher, a Pharisee, was a representative of Judaism and the synagogue system, and not of the Temple. So even this Pharisee who was a scholar of Tradition (***Halakhah***) more than actual Biblical Torah held these two principles as the basis for his own Scriptural understanding. So we must not be overly harsh on 2nd Temple Judaism or the Pharisees and think that they had gone so far as to abandon God's Biblical Torah and replace it with their own Traditions.

While you might not recognize it as such, verse 11 to the end of Romans chapter 13 is about the End Times. Paul says, "You know at what point of history we stand". I've mentioned in earlier lessons that undeniably Paul believes that he is living in the End Times and expects Yeshua's return at any moment. It is why he behaves and tries to motivate others to salvation with such zeal and urgency; to his bones he believes time is very short. But Paul wasn't the only one who believed that the end was imminent. In the Apocryphal book of Enoch 51 we read this:

"In those days the Elect One will arise and choose the righteous and holy from among them, because the day for their being saved has come near".

Paul speaks of awakening out of our sleep. I don't think he means this negatively; that is, that people have not been paying attention or they have intentionally ignored reality. Rather it seems to me that he is saying that it has been so very long since the promise of God to Abraham has been made, and so very long that the Jews have lived either in exile or under the harsh hand of a foreign occupier. Thus the prophecy that Israel and the Jews will be delivered has been as if in a coma but the coma is ending and now is the time for Israel to awaken because the time of their deliverance is upon them. I think that interpretation is backed up by Paul's words that "The night is almost over and the day is almost here". Since darkness is always a biblical metaphor for evil and light is always a biblical metaphor for good then we can better understand the words that follow about putting off behavior that occurs in darkness and putting on behavior that occurs in daylight. He then goes on to list a few behaviors that occur in darkness that need to stop, especially among Believers. No doubt this would have been a particular problem in the City of Rome where the recipients of his letter resided. Stop partying, stop getting drunk, and stop engaging in sexual immorality. Also stop every excess and cease being quarrelsome or jealous. Most of these exhortations we can understand because of their plain meaning. Without getting into detail, however, I want to reiterate that especially when it comes to sexual immorality, large segments of the Church have today utterly abandoned any pretence of prohibiting it. Those segments ordain gay ministers; they sanctify gay marriages; they have no issue with couples living together and having children without the benefit of marriage; and adultery is thought to be a private matter. Why do they believe this way? Because they have abandoned sexual morality in the same way they have abandoned God's Word as the infallible source of truth and instead are following manmade doctrines. Therefore the definitions of terms like immorality and even love have been redefined to become popular.

Paul ends this chapter by essentially saying that due to where we are in history, it is a waste of valuable time to do all these wrong things as the final grains of sand drain out of the hour glass. Rather we need to be productive for the Kingdom of God while we still can. How do we

do this? Paul says by “clothing” ourselves with Yeshua. The mental picture of clothing ourselves with Yeshua was mostly meaningful to the Jews of Paul's audience because such a motif was common in Judaism and it regularly referred to righteousness. So we are to put on the righteousness given to us as a free gift on account of our trust in Christ's sacrifice and His perfect faithfulness and get on with the business of living a redeemed life of victory as opposed to our former life as a slave to sin.

We'll begin Romans chapter 14 next time.