

Reasonable Service part 2
Romans 13

Responsive Psalm 131 and 133
Colossians 2:1-10
Colossians 2:11-23

This morning should be fun, I say that because we are going to be diving into a little bit of controversial subject matter here in Chapter 13. And honestly, I think a bit of controversy is actually good. Subjects become controversial not because everything agrees, but because of disagreement and its healthy to assess, and reassess our stances, our beliefs, and challenge ourselves to be sure that we are standing not upon our own thoughts, or even desires, but on what scripture teaches. As believers our final authority is the word of God, for it is through the word that God instructs, and teaches us, and it is through the word of God that he reveals to us who he is, so when the bible makes a statement, your ears should perk up a bit, for it is God instructing, or showing us something. Take for instance last week's passage, the last half of chapter 12. God, through Paul is laying out in simple terms what a Christian life is to look like. Paul had spent a few chapters instructing his readers that the law avails us nothing, there is no righteousness to be found by the keeping of the law, or by the temple traditions and sacrifices. Therefore righteousness before God is only found through the one whom God had sent to give it, to distribute it among his adopted children, and those children have been given the spirit who ministers and guides them as they walk through this life.

And those who have the spirit have no need for an external law, for it is the spirit working in them to will and to do that which is good. In fact, so much so that the argument of the Apostles in scripture is that if you are resting upon works of righteousness brought about by the law, observing the sabbath, observing dietary laws, or any other such thing, then it is possible the spirit is not in you, and you are not truly saved. I say, it is possible, because there are many, especially today who have just been lead down a path of law keeping through ignorance, and such does not necessarily reflect on their salvation, but rather merely on their understanding. And in that ignorance, sadly they do not give the spirit enough credit, for by striving to keep parts and pieces of the law, they are essentially claiming the spirit is not enough to keep them from sin, that helper, which God has given that we may know and understand and see God through scripture, and that helper which convicts and instructs when we go astray, is not good enough, therefore we need to look to the law to find rules and guides. This is the error of falling into legalism, this is the error of setting forth rules and guides, and standards for what is believed to be christian conduct. Paul, and others have written over and over against such practices, saying that if you are truly of Christ, it is his spirit, indwelling in you, which works in you and through you to do that which is pleasing to him.

So when these authors law out lists of things that define what a believer should be like, these are not a new set of laws or requirements, but rather they are examples pointing to what should be the natural inclinations within the hearts and minds of those who love God and have been washed by the blood of the lamb on the cross. This is the entire point that Paul is making in chapter 12, and it is important to grasp this before we go into chapter 13 or we will be heading into that chapter starting with a misunderstanding. If we look at all these things as rules and regulations, then we have already lost the meaning and purpose of what Paul is getting at. Paul is describing the ideal, simply what our lives should look like, not because we strive to check off every piece of it as some sort of righteous goal, but these are things that should naturally flow out from us, for we have the spirit of God working in us to work these good works.

And we do so, not to gain righteousness or merit, but because of love, a love toward the father who first loved us, a love that recognizes if it were not for him, we would still be lost and condemned in our sins, a love that rejoices, and worships, and praises him seeing what mercy and grace he has given. So how can we, who have been given such love, not love in return? And it is that love, which is at the core of our conduct as believers, it is a true, genuine, love for Christ, that drives us to please him. God has given us an example of this in our own children, who as they grow up, begin to understand you as a parent more, and the need for rules and regulations and strict parenting sort of fades as they grow up, and they instead do things out of love and understanding instead of fear of punishment. Scripture says, that the law was given as a tutor, to keep the children in line, until the promised Messiah comes and establishes a nation of believers through the spirit. It is like our own children, at a young age, they need law and guidance, but when understanding and growth occurs, obedience comes out of love, and respect.

So we have Paul saying things like, in verse 9 of chapter 12, “let love be without hypocrisy, abhor what is evil, and cling to what is good.” This is not a new law to replace the old, but is a descriptor of one who is in the faith, and what does this look like? how does love without hypocrisy show itself? Verse 10. “by being kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor, giving preference to one another.” If this was some sort of rule, or regulation...do you think that one could be kindly affectionate, and yet do so with hypocrisy? Of course they can, in fact if one is doing it out of a sense of duty and requirement surely, there is a sense of hypocrisy involved. By that I mean, it is not an act truly driven out of love, but rather out of necessity and purpose and as we all know, we as humans, still in the flesh, often do things begrudgingly, our heart isn't in it, but we do it out of a sense of purpose or necessity. If we look at this one simple exhortation from Paul as something as a requirement and law that we must perform, then we will find ourselves doing such begrudgingly, or at the very least as a sort of empty heartless response. But Paul says, no, let this be without hypocrisy, let it be an action born out of true love for one another, a true love that flows from the spirit filled heart who reflects the love and grace of God.

Fully grasping and understanding this concept opens up an entirely new world in the faith, when we begin to see and understand that the instruction from the apostles isn't a new law or guide, but rather a descriptor of a life lived in the belief and service of God out of Love for him, it changes how we interact with the world around us, it changes how we approach scripture, it changes our worship, our prayer. As we have been going through this book of Romans Paul is showing over and over again the reality of a life in Christ, lived by faith, through the spirit, making the argument over and over again that Gods children not only are able, but will follow the will of the father, simply because they love him for what he has done. And Jesus was the living, breathing embodiment of the father, he said if you have seen me, you have seen the father, for the father and I are one. So we are to model our lives after Christ, to be more Christlike in our conduct, but here's the thing...God's children will be, for it is a trait of the new birth, all who have been born again into the family of God carry with them the traits of their father, which Paul lists as the fruits of the spirit that we looked at last week. I know for many of us this idea or concept is not a new one, for what I am trying to hammer home here is one of the main concepts of what has been called New Covenant Theology. We who are in Christ are no longer under the law, no longer bound to a list of do's and don'ts, in fact almost everyone one of us here are gentiles who as scripture shows and as Paul pointed out a few times here in this book, were never under the law to begin with. But instead we have been given the spirit of God, and being Christlike, has simply become who we are.

And in the end, it is our actions, our works which prove out that faith, showing the claim of faith is real for the works of righteousness naturally flow and follow. That was James' entire point, one can claim to believe, but if they do not show forth Christlike love, and works, if their life doesn't reflect Christ, then there is no spirit, and if no spirit that belief is empty and without hope. All of this is important to grasp before we go into chapter 13, we must understand our relationship with God, what it means to be a people guided by the spirit, and I see the key to chapter 13, in 18 of chapter 2. "If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men." Again we have Christ as our example, the bible described him as a humble man of sorrows, he was not haughty and arrogant, he stood upon the truth, instructed in the ways of God but did not seek conflict, but rather conflict sought him, as the religious leaders were always on the attack to discredit, or even kill him. Just because we strive to live peaceably with all men, doesn't mean that is an attainable reality, for there are those who will hate us simply for what we believe, and we are to defend our belief, and tear down the strongholds of their arguments, but let our defense be with words, giving an opportunity to express the grace and mercy to those who hate us, just as God did toward us, Paul follows this up with a reminder that vengeance is not our place, it is God who will avenge himself in truth in the last day, putting to shame the mockers, and the scoffers as they will be faced with the consequence of their sin.

The wisdom here is to treat our enemies with compassion, if they are hungry feed them, if they are thirsty give them a drink for we are to reflect the grace and mercy that was given to us by God. For we do not know who God has called, we do not know how the spirit may work. Look at Paul, a self described Pharisee of the Pharisees, a powerful man rising in power and stature hunting and persecuting Christians, an enemy of the cross if there ever was one....now, writes this book to the Roman believers saying, As much as you are able, live peaceably with all men, and do not concern yourself with vengeance or wrath as I did going out seeking to destroy all those I have seen as blasphemers, That is God's concern, not ours. Help the sick, feed the poor, show kindness and mercy toward those who hate you, and in so doing it will either bring about faith as they see the reflection of God in you, or it will make their sin and guilt all the more. Do not overcome evil with evil, do not meet violence with violence, or anger with anger, but instead overcome evil with good.

And that brings us to chapter 13, this controversial chapter which I think rightly understood is not controversial at all, the problem is that people lay upon scripture their own understanding or what they want to get out of it without first looking at the context leading into these parts, which is why I wanted to spend a little time this morning refreshing on what was said last week for it gives way to understanding the application of what Paul is saying here in chapter 13. This isn't a new thought, or a new concept, but he is continuing to build upon this picture of what the life of a Christ follower will look like. Again, not given as a guide to be followed like a checking off of lists and rules, but a descriptor of those who are of this faith. So keeping all of this in mind, let us go ahead and read the first 10 verse of chapter 13, (READ 13:1-10)

The very first thought that comes to mind when reading verse 1, is God's sovereignty, it is he who has appointed the governing authorities, and he has done so, so that his will and purpose may be accomplished. Let that sink in for a moment, yes, even the evil ruler, the corrupt politician, is appointed by God so that his purpose may stand. Caesar? Appointed by God, the Religious leaders in Israel at the time of Christ, appointed by God, so that God's plan of salvation may be brought upon all of mankind through the death of his Son. Pharaoh? Appointed by God, God said for this very reason I have raised you up, so that I may show my power in you. The subjugation and oppression of the Hebrews by Pharaoh was all a part of God's plan so that he may show his wrath upon one, and his mercy upon another.

We would be foolish think if anything has changed, God raises up leaders all around the world for his purpose. We don't get a clear picture and understanding of God's working in such things as we do in the scriptural accounts, but that doesn't change the fact that God is still the ruling authority who appoints all ruling authorities in this world. Therefore Paul says in verse 2, "Whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment to themselves." It would seem to those that Paul is writing there may have been a contingency of people within the church of Rome who had anti-Roman sentiments. As with all governments there is a contingent of it's citizens who given half the chance would rebel against it and maybe some of these were among those to whom Paul was writing. As he is giving application to what he has been writing he includes as a part of "living peaceably among all men" as to include the governing body. We all know that the Roman government was corrupt, at various times throughout it's history persecuting Christians, imprisoning them, beating them, sending them to be slaughtered in the Colosseum for the amusement of the people. Paul is instructing, do give them reason to come for you, live in peace, uprising and overthrowing that government is not the answer, remember, what he just wrote, Beloved, do not avenge yourselves for it is written, "Vengeance is mind, I will repay, says the lord."

One example that always comes to mind in any discussion of this chapter, is the church in China. For a short period there, Christianity flourished within the community, the Chinese government lifted restrictions, allowed churches to publicly form and gather, albeit with restrictions but there was a time when Christians could gather together and worship without fear of governmental retaliation, for the Chinese government recognized Christians as good, law abiding citizens. That is until they were not, I remember reading a few prominent pastors joined in the Hong Kong protests, and became voices for democracy, speaking out against the communist government. Those pastor's were arrested, their churches disband, and now the Christian faith was seen as a bastion of rebellion against the government. Because of the actions of a few, the governing authority changed, from allowance, to banning the churches ability to gather. I read one account of a church gathering and the authorities came, and without warning began to bulldoze the building with the people inside, seeking to break up and strike fear in any such gathering.

So when Paul says here, respect the governing authorities, it is a situation like this is what he has in mind, for he warns, those who resist bring judgment upon themselves, just like the church in China. I think the point that we must be reminded of, is that we serve a higher power then our governing authorities, and our concern should be one of ministry and spreading the gospel, in peace, and love. When the church loses it's purpose, and begins to focus on other things, so called social justice issues, taking up political banners, the focus becomes less and less about the gospel and more about trying to reform and change the society through political means. Our founding fathers were wise, coming from governmental sanctions religions, seeing the issue in that, establishing in this nation a separation between church and state. And yet many churches take it upon themselves to become political mouth pieces, and carry the banner for political parties....the church is not the place for such things, for the gathering of believers is to worship God, to encourage and exhort one another in the faith, and to equip it's members for the ministry to share the hope in Christ to a dying world. As such the pulpit should not be given over to politicians to stump for their campaign, as some churches have done. Again it is a losing focus on what we, as a gathering of believers are to be doing with this time.

As individuals, we live in a nation that allows us to have political discourse, who has since its founding given a voice to it's people, and there is nothing wrong with being involved, and interacting within the political sphere, as long as it is done so in the confines of good order, according to the confines which has been set as our avenue of interaction.

That is, being politically involved, campaigning, voting, raising money these are all viable and doable things for the believer in this nations. But, we should not be party to uprising, we should not be party to rebellion, for our mission, as believers and ministers of the word of God, is not a battle of flesh and bone, but of spirit. You want to create effective change within your society? Preach the word, go about making disciples, focus upon what God has put before you for a ministry, and when we gather, each week, we do so to praise and worship him for the work that he has done in each of our lives, bringing us to him, drawing us ever closer to him, providing mercy through trial, and blessing in abundance. Paul lays forth a few other key points building upon his instruction which I think is him expounding upon the concept of living peaceably with all men. These we will dive into a bit deeper next time, all I wanted to deal with today is setting forth the groundwork for the conversation that Paul has in this chapter, remembering our focus is to always be on Christ, the ministry, and to support and love one another. And we are to conduct ourselves in such a manner that it reflects these truths, that it reflects Christ, we are a lighthouse in the stormy dark sea, shining forth God's light to offer guidance to the lost ships, so that they may find safe harbor, and rest their anchors in the still waters of God. Let us never lose focus of our mission, let us never lose our purpose, may we always have our hearts and minds set on things above, looking to a higher power, with a higher purpose, which is to go forth, share the gospel, so that others may believe.