

# “THROUGH THE BIBLE”

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## ROMANS 13-14

God has established three institutions - and only three. The *Jaycees*, *Kiwanis*, *Toastmasters*, even the *Booster Club* may be fine organizations. But none of them are divinely inspired. They're human inventions. There are only three God-ordained institutions... In Genesis 2 God established **marriage and the family**. In Acts 2 He birthed **the church**. And in Genesis 9, God originated **human government**... When Noah exited the Ark, God gave basic principles to human beings by which they would rule themselves. Before the global flood, God saw enough anarchy, chaos, and unbridled evil in the world to be convinced that man needed some form of self-rule to avoid another judgment... so God instituted *government*.

Our Lord Jesus also affirmed the role of human government. In Matthew 22:21, Jesus laid out mankind's dual responsibility, "**Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.**" Our lives belong *to God*, but we also have an obligation *to government*. Now 25 years later, it's obvious Paul was still chewing on the ramifications of Jesus' statement. His phraseology in verse 7 even sounds like Jesus. Romans 13 explains the Christian's duty to *God and country*.

The chapter begins, "**Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God.**" And here's the key word, "**the authorities that exist.**" It's not just that government in general is God's idea, but the rulers that currently "**exist**" are there as a result of God's determination. You thought they were elected, but God is sovereign – He is behind the scenes pulling the strings. He is the one who ultimately *sets up* and *brings down* administrations. Though He disapproves of their evil, this means God allows the *Hitlers*, *Stalins*, *Sadaams* – as well as, the *Bushs* and *Obamas* – to rise to power. He has His reasons. God orchestrates the political stage for His own purposes. After the wicked Babylonian despot, Nebuchadnezzar, sacked the city of Jerusalem, the Prophet Jeremiah still referred to him as "**God's Servant.**"

God knows that human government is imperfect – but apparently, even a flawed government is better than no government at all. We need to see the big picture... "**Both democracy AND dictatorship is better than anarchy.**" Judges 21:25 describes the darkest time in Israel's history, "**In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes.**" Certainly, the best form of government is a *theocracy* – where the true God sits on the throne. The Bible predicts the earth will one day be ruled by Jesus. But until then, *any form of government is better than no government at all*.

Remember who was on the throne in Rome – *just down the street* - when Paul wrote this letter to the Romans... *Caesar Nero was a certifiable nut job!* Nero set himself up as a god. He killed his wife and son to consolidate his power. He threw the Christians to the lions and burned them at the stake to light his drunken orgies. Nero set fire to Rome to make room for his expansive building projects. "**Nero fiddled while Rome burned.**" Caesar was a madman. Yet Paul is crystal clear – despite the personality holding the office - He tells the Church they

need to respect and obey the governing authority.

Verse 2, “Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves.” Building Code Inspectors and Fire Marshals can seem tedious, bothersome, and irrelevant. I had a Code Enforcement Official write me a ticket for parking a couple of my cars in the pine straw beside my house. I was livid. *It’s my pine straw!* But I ended up complying. As long as a law is not immoral or unbiblical - even if I think it’s stupid - I need to submit to the governing authorities. In those rare cases where *the law of the land* conflicts with *the laws of God*, the Bible teaches - we must obey God rather than man. But that’s rare. Generally speaking, God uses human government *to keep civilization civil*.

“For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil.” I remind myself of this whenever I’m cruising down the interstate. As long as I’m driving the speed limit I’ve got nothing to worry about. My driving becomes “*terror*” free. “Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. For he is God’s minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God’s minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil.” Generally speaking, legislators and policemen don’t pick on good, law-abiding citizens. Laws are written to restrain the bad guys, not hassle the good guys. The flood in Noah’s day proved that God is faithful to punish evil, but afterwards the tool God chose to help with this task was human government. In verse 4 Paul refers to the police officer as “*God’s minister*.” Notice, he “*bears the sword*” – or in our day, *packs a revolver* - at God’s discretion. One day Jesus will return to Earth to visibly rule the world and right all wrongs - but until then, God restrains evil, and punishes evildoers, and maintains an orderly society - through the instrument of human government.

Verse 5, “Therefore you must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience’ sake.” Our motivation for observing the Law shouldn’t be just to avoid punishment. We should respect the God-given authority the Law represents – whether the Law is a speed limit, or a building code, *or a lamebrain prohibition about parking in your own pine straw... (sorry!)* If believers can’t submit to authorities we can see, how can we tell others to submit to God’s authority - that we can’t see? When a “*Praise the Lord*” bumper sticker goes sailing down the freeway at 95 mph *it’s a sorry witness*. Once a policeman was enforcing the dress code at an ritzy restaurant. A man walks in with a jacket, but no necktie. The cop refused to let him enter. The rebellious patron goes out to his car, wraps his jumper cables around his neck, comes back in and shouts, “*There! I’m wearing a tie!*” The cop glares back at him and says, “*Ok, but you better not start something!*” Paul is saying, “*Just obey the governing authorities and you’ll avoid a lot of trouble.*”

“For because of this you also pay taxes, for they are God’s ministers attending continually to this very thing.” Notice, not only does Paul consider the police “*God’s minister*,” but he uses the same term for the tax collector. Did you hear about the guy who walked into the IRS office and sat down. When the receptionist asked if she could help him he responded, “*No, I just want to see the people I’ve been working for all these years.*” I hate paying taxes, but I do; for God has commanded me to pay the taxes I owe.

“Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes *are due*, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor.” Notice the two words used “*taxes*” and “*customs*.” The word translated “*taxes*” referred to an annual tax - similar to an income or real estate tax. The word “*custom*” referred to a tax on goods - like a sales tax. Paul says pay them both! “*But Pastor Sandy, what if the government spends our tax money foolishly or immorally... are we still suppose to pay the taxes?*” The answer is YES! Do you think for a moment the taxes paid to Nero were used to open Christian schools and old folks’ homes? You’re dreaming! Paul knew at least a portion of Rome’s tax

base was spent on wild orgies and pagan idolatry. Paul's taxes paid for *circuses and carnivals* - yet he paid them anyway!

I sign my 1040 Form, seal the envelope, drop it in the mailbox, and from then on God holds the politicians responsible for how the money gets spent... I've done my duty. My God-given responsibility is to pay my taxes. Historians tell us taxes in the Roman Empire were more exorbitant what Americans pay today - yet Christians paid every dime. Second Century church leader, Tertullian, said, "[What Romans lost by the Christians refusing to bestow gifts on their pagan temples, they gained by their conscientious payment of taxes.](#)" Government is ordained by God and funded by us!

Verse 8, "[Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law.](#)" Some Christians see this verse as a blanket prohibition against all borrowing. Yet the context of the verse is about *paying*, not *avoiding* debt. Our taxes are a debt we're all obligated to pay. Here's what people do - they make a huge deal out of the first half of the verse "[owe no one anything,](#)" and ignore the later half, "[except to love one another.](#)" Pay what you owe, but remember our debt of love is never paid. If we love others the way God has loved us we're perpetual debtors.

["For the commandments, "You shall not commit adultery," "You shall not murder," "You shall not steal," "You shall not bear false witness," "You shall not covet," and if there is any other commandment, are all summed up in this saying, namely, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.](#)" Here Paul lists the second tablet of the Ten Commandments – how we treat our fellow man. God wanted the Hebrews to understand what love looks like... But once Jesus puts His love in us the written rules become obsolete. Real love won't lust after a neighbor's wife, or kill, or steal, or lie. It'll give not take.

["And do this, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep; for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed."](#) God intends for His Church - in the first century and in the 21<sup>st</sup> century - to live in light of an overshadowing truth - *Jesus is coming back!* This is what the Paul and his 1<sup>st</sup> century pals believed. And this is what we believe today.

Once a little boy heard the grandfather clock malfunction. It chimed 15 times. He shouted, "[Mommy, mommy, it's later than its ever been before.](#)" And that's certainly what we can say today! We see signs of the end times all around us... *a proliferation of natural disasters, the rebirth of Israel, globalism, unity in Europe, hostility toward Jews, etc...* But wherever we are on God's timeline, there's one certainty – *it's later than it's ever been before.* Time is running out if for no other reason than we're all getting older. Our salvation is nearer than when we first believed. If you're going to make a splash for Jesus you better jump in! Wait much longer and it'll be too late!

Verse 12, "[The night is far spent, the day is at hand. Therefore let us cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light. Let us walk properly, as in the day, not in revelry and drunkenness, not in lewdness and lust, not in strife and envy.](#)" When Jesus returns - do you want to be drunk? What if the trumpet blows, and you're in bed with someone who's not your spouse? What if Jesus appeared while you were on the phone stirring up some juicy gossip? It's past time to get serious about living for Jesus!

["But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts."](#) To "[put on Jesus](#)" means to develop a new identity – a new mind-set – that's geared around spiritual pursuits, not sinful lusts. Here's the Christian life in a nutshell... *cast off darkness - put on Christ.*

There's an old saying I'm fond of, "A bulldog can whip a skunk, but is it really worth the effort?" In other words, there are battles not worth fighting! And such was the case in the church at Rome. Believers were embroiled in battles over nonessential, supplemental issues. *They were minoring on the majors and majoring on the minors.* They'd lost focus of what really counts! In Romans 14 Paul addresses two types of Christians... The **weaker brother** is straight-laced, and self-righteous. He believes in Jesus, but takes pride in his discipline and his abstinence. He thinks God's favor is tied to his conformity to outward standards. Thus, he minds his religious manners – never diverges too far from tradition. He's into rules. Whereas the **stronger brother** is free from law and tradition. He knows he's right with God by faith alone. In Christ his compliance to custom is no longer required. His strong faith in Jesus, frees him up to follow His heart.

It's ironic, look at the two brothers and you might get confused. One brother is more lax compared to the Spartan discipline of the other. But from Paul's perspective the brother trusting in God's grace is stronger in faith than the guy who's trying to build a religious resume that will secure God's favor. Real strength is based on *faith* – not our own *fortitude*. It's *reliance on Christ*, not *compliance to rules*. It's easier on my pride to point out reasons God should love me, than it is to admit I'm a sinner and in need of His grace. And here's what's sure to happen... The conformist sees his nonconformist brother and wonders why he's so nonchalant and apathetic? Whereas, the nonconformist will accuse his weaker brother of legalism... This is what was happening in the church at Rome. And Paul puts out the fire in chapter 14...

Verse 1, "Receive one who is weak in the faith, but not to disputes over doubtful things. For one believes he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats *only vegetables*." The city of Rome had a wholesale grocery called "The Shambles." There you could purchase quality meat at a cut-rate price. And church members were shopping the shambles. The shambles though, got its meat from pagan temples. Idolaters made their sacrifices, then sold the extras *to turn a profit* for their *false prophets*. Stronger believers weren't bothered by the tainted meat. Meat was just meat. Their standing with God was based on *the faith they put in Christ* not *the food they put on their plate*. The *libertarians* felt free to cook-out. But the weaker believers – those who trusted in dos and don'ts - were appalled at the thought of eating desecrated meat. This was guilt-by-association. To them eating the meat was equal to participating in the idolatry. To these *vegetarians* - the *ground round was out of bounds*.

Obviously, most of us never agonize over the spiritual implications of what we purchase from the Meat Market. This seems like an irrelevant issue. But how we handle nonessentials in church life is terribly important. Usually Christians divide and fellowships fracture not over major issues. They split over minor concerns. We tend to agree on the essentials. Its the nonessentials where we polarize - get petty and picky with each other. Our judgmental spirit spoils the sweetness of our unity. As Paul puts it in verse 1, we tend to get distracted in "*disputes over doubtful things*."

Verse 3, "Let not him who eats despise him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats; for God has received him. Who are you to judge another's servant? To his own master he stands or falls." I'm not your Lord, and you're not mine. When it comes to nonessentials we answer to Jesus – not each other. We're all at different stages of maturity. There may be healthy reasons the weaker brother holds on to convictions you've felt free to lay aside. He could be an alcoholic. He may never be free to take a drink. *The guy who can* shouldn't look down his nose at *the guy who can't*. And *the guy who can't* shouldn't feel superior to *the guy who can*. I love the tail end of verse 4, "Indeed, he will be made to stand, for God is able to make him stand."

When I started CC I was a 22 year-old kid. I sported a grungy beard and flip flop. I wore a black shirt with pink flamingos. I'm sure folks visited, took one look at me, and figured that guy will never make it. *And of course the verdict is still out* - but so far, God has made me stand! Never judge a guy based on the nonessentials. If God is in his corner - no matter how different he might be from you - God can make him stand!

Verse 5, “**One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind.**” It wasn't just *diet*, but *days* that troubled the Romans. Do we worship on Saturday or Sunday? Do we keep the OT feasts or have they become obsolete? Paul is saying when it comes to nonessentials there is no right or wrong – black of white – it's a gray matter. It boils down to personal preference. As Paul writes, “**Let each be fully convinced in his own mind.**”

Here's a list of gray matters... *a glass of wine at dinner, a beer after mowing the lawn... Can a Christian chew tobacco, or smoke a cigar?... Can a godly woman wear a two piece swimsuit?... Can a man grow his hair long – or sport an ear-ring - and still be pleasing to God?... And what about tattoos?* Gray matters also appear in **family life**... *Is it more spiritual to breast feed or bottle feed?... How should a Christian educate his kids - home school? Christian school? public school?... Is it right or wrong to put your elderly parents in a nursing home, or does God want you to bring them home to live out their days?... And what about Santa Claus?...* These are all gray matters! **Worship styles** and **church etiquette** are also subject to varying shades of gray. *Is it pleasing to God to play rock-and-roll music on Sunday AM?... Can a person wear shorts to church?... Should communion be taken weekly or quarterly?... Can we use face cards and play spades at a church retreat?...* And gray matters even appear in **doctrine**. *Baptism by immersion or baptism by sprinkling... Will the rapture occur before or after the Tribulation?* Good Christians line up on both sides... And of course, the granddaddy of all church splitters - *is a believer really once saved, always saved?...*

These are all gray matters, yet to some people gray matters really matter! Paul tells us that peace is found in the Lordship of Jesus. Rather than *me telling you what to do, or you telling me*. It's up to each of us to report directly to Jesus. The Holy Spirit will lead each believer at his or her own pace. If an issue is squarely addressed in Scripture our position is clear – stick to the Script. Black-and-white is easy. But in a gray matter we need to leave some latitude. Don't be dogmatic. Leave room to grow - even to disagree.

Verse 6, “**He who observes the day, observes it to the Lord; and he who does not observe the day, to the Lord he does not observe it. He who eats, eats to the Lord, for he gives God thanks; and he who does not eat, to the Lord he does not eat, and gives God thanks.**” Notice, two people can be on opposite ends of a gray issue and both still be pleasing to God. He looks at the heart. You eat meat to the glory of God. I abstain to the glory of God - what matters is that we both want to glorify God.

“**For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself. For if we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's.**” We'll all answer to the Lord, not each other. “**For to this end Christ died and rose and lived again, that He might be Lord of both the dead and the living.**” Jesus paid the ultimate price to be Lord of His Church – He “**died and rose and lives again...**” Beware, you usurp His place when you judge a brother. *Do you really want to take over as Lord?* My fourth born was a late walker. He's doing fine now. He plays college baseball. But the reason he crawled for so long is that he lived in a house with three other siblings. He didn't have room to walk without being knocked down. This is what keeps a lot of new babes in Christ from learning to walk. We don't give them enough room! They don't feel the freedom to make a mistake. They're afraid if they mess up they'll get knocked down so they just crawl.

Real spiritual growth involves some risk. It's easier just to *sit back* and be told what to do - than it is to *step out* and learn to follow Jesus for yourself.

Verse 10, "But why do you judge your brother? Or why do you show contempt for your brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. For it is written: "As I live, says the LORD, every knee shall bow to Me, and every tongue shall confess to God." So then each of us shall give account of himself to God." Everyone will be accountable to God. Believers will be judged differently than unbelievers, but Jesus will be Judge over us all. That's why it's foolish for us to judge each other... Remember the motto, "in essentials, unity. In nonessentials, liberty. In all things, charity."

"Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather resolve this, not to put a stumbling block or a cause to fall in our brother's way." A man is talking on the phone, and we're allowed to hear only one side of the conversation, "Yes, Gladys has been difficult - I know I ought to be more firm, but it's hard. You know how she is... Yes, I remember you warned me. You told me she was a hard woman who would make my life miserable. You begged me not to marry her. You were right... You want to talk to her? Okay." He calls into the other room, "Gladys, your mother wants to talk to you." Poor Gladys, its one thing to be shot down by a mother-in-law, *but to be zinged by your own mom!* And the same is true in the Body of Christ. We expect the world to try and destroy us, but when the stumbling blocks come from our own family its terrible. Paul warns us not to participate in an activity that's going to tempt or mislead another brother or sister in Christ.

Verse 14, "I know and am convinced by the Lord Jesus that *there is nothing unclean of itself; but to him who considers anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean.*" Take rock music for example. What's the difference between a "C" note played on a grand piano, and a "C" on an electric guitar? Obviously, there is no difference. What makes any form of music good or evil is the message it communicates, and the spirit in which its played. Paul is convinced that nothing in the world is intrinsically evil. Whether it becomes good or bad is determined by how its used. How it's used makes a thing moral or immoral. All things are pure to the person with a pure heart. One man can use an object to the glory of God. Another man can become ensnared by that same object. The problem is not the object, but the man.

"Yet if your brother is grieved because of *your food, you are no longer walking in love. Do not destroy with your food the one for whom Christ died.*" A thing becomes sinful when it causes me to get distracted and **fumble** away my faith. Or when my example causes a brother to **stumble** in his faith. Listen to how Eugene Peterson paraphrases these verses, "All food is good, but it can turn bad if you use it badly, if you use it to trip others up and send them sprawling. When you sit down to a meal, your primary concern should not be to feed your own face but to share the life of Jesus... don't you dare let a piece of God-blessed food become an occasion of soul-poisoning!"

Once a TV repair man hated bringing his work home. As a result he never properly installed the antenna on top of his own house. Even when the arm on the antenna broke off in the storm, he failed to make the needed repair. When a new neighbor moved in next door, *he knew he was living next to a TV repairman*, so he installed his antenna exactly like his lazy neighbor. After careful study, he even broke off a part of the arm. *Foiled by a faulty example!* It just goes to prove that we're an example whether we know it or not.

And the same is true in God's family. A weaker brother sees you exercise a liberty, and follows your example, but ends up falling into bondage. *His faith* gets sabotaged by *your liberty*. Instead of being a *brother* you've been a *stumbling block* – a *blockhead*. Was exercising your freedom really worth it?

There once was a man who always had a bottle of wine with his Thanksgiving dinner. One Thanksgiving he found himself bone dry, so he bundle up and headed to the corner liquor store. As he walked down the street he heard someone following him. It was his little boy. It stunned him where he was leading his son. He turned around and headed back home. I've heard it said, "The shepherd paces the flock to accommodate the weakest lamb." Let's remember, we can destroy with our food, a brother for whom Christ died. If you're truly free it's as easy to *restrain* as it is to *indulge*.

Verse 16, "Therefore do not let your good be spoken of as evil; for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." The Romans were upset over diet and days, but meat and drink are of little consequence in God's scheme of things. What matters in the Kingdom of God are *matters of the heart!* Phil Taylor grew up in a white church in the Deep South during the 1960s. I can identify. He writes about his experience, "I don't know how we missed it. While King marched on Selma and an entire race cried out for justice, I heard sermons against rock and roll, the Beatles, mini-skirts, and long hair – but I never heard them mention racism, injustice, intolerance, hatred, and bigotry. Those are the things God hates." Churches have a penchant for *missing the forest for the trees*. We fail to see the obvious. *God, please open our eyes!*

Verse 18, "For he who serves Christ in these things is acceptable to God and approved by men. Therefore let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another." You've confused your priorities if you **hurt a brother** just to *flaunt a freedom* or *make a statement*. Our priority should always be the building up and encouraging of one another. *Loving a brother is always more important than proving a point.*

Verse 20, "Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food." God's mission in the world is to save souls and mature believers, not indulge callous Christians who care more about making a point than helping folks grow. Don't forget *our fellowship* is just as precious as *our freedom*.

The great preacher, Charles Spurgeon, used to smoke cigars. For a time he was quite proud of the fact. Once, Spurgeon was questioned about his smoking. He replied, "I never smoke in excess." When someone asked him what he meant by "excess," he answered, "Never more than two at a time." Spurgeon felt at liberty to light up a stogy, until one day he saw a billboard advertisement which read, "Smoke the brand that Spurgeon smokes." As the story goes, from that day on he laid them down and never smoked another cigar. He didn't want a believer to become addicted to a vice because of his example.

Verse 20, "All things indeed are pure, but it is evil for the man who eats with offense. It is good neither to eat meat nor drink wine nor do anything by which your brother stumbles or is offended or is made weak. Do you have faith? Have it to yourself before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves. But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because he does not eat from faith; for whatever is not from faith is sin." Again, two rules apply to our participation in any activity... *First*, does it cause me to *fumble away my faith*? If I can't do it in faith, to the glory of God, I'm not free to participate. And *second*, does it *cause my brother to stumble*? If it causes a *fumble* or a *stumble* I shouldn't go there. Rather than *fumble* or *stumble* we all should be *humble!* We all need to grow. The weaker brother should *grow in His understanding* of God's grace. While the stronger brother should *grow in His love* for other people.