

Akron Christian Reformed Church

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Romans 13.1-7; Romans 12.9-21; Romans 13.8-10

Living as Christians in a Pagan Empire

Prayer: Tune our hearts, dear Lord, to your heart. May we love as you love. May we care as you care. May we be merciful as you are merciful. Remove from us all judgment and harshness and impatience as we serve the world around us. Amen.

My father grew up in a hard, totally secular, family, without a father present, during the depression in rural Michigan. He said that they survived only on the kindness of their neighbors.

He graduated from High School in 1943, joined the Navy and eventually landed at Iwo Jima which he described as “hell.” After the war he moved to Detroit, met my mother, moved to East Lansing and went to college. Then somehow, they ended up in Grand Rapids, where they became Christians. And here I am, a preacher.

Until that time, he’d never attended a church service. Never read a Bible. Never learned anything about Jesus or faith. He was a pagan.

When I was in the Seminary, one day he said to me, “Make sure you tell people about Jesus being their Lord. A lot of people in the church talk about Jesus being their Savior, but he’s also their Lord. That was a very hard lesson for me. I had to give up everything about my life before when I accepted Jesus as my Lord. I had to change. I know too many Christians who want Jesus to save them, but not nearly as many who want Jesus to rule them.”

It’s strange how we never forget a few snippets while losing a vast majority. I’ve often wondered if that short, singular conversation, is the root of my emphasis of Christ as King.

I can’t even imagine the dissonance that the Apostle Paul endured as he became a follower of the Christ. It had to be tremendous. He talks about his Jewish roots in Philippians 3.

[I was] circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless. (3.5-6)

Paul was as deeply immersed in the Jewish faith as anyone. He was a zealot who murdered Christians, *in the service of God*. But then, he encountered Jesus on the road to Damascus and everything changed. He began to follow Jesus as Savior and as Lord.

And my father’s right, the church has often read Paul’s letters to discern words about salvation. But Paul is just as interested in Jesus as King. And so, he’s constantly instructing his rag-tag band of converts about what it means to live as disciples of the one true King – not Caesar, but Jesus.

As we’ve noted before, there’s a handful of Christians in Rome when Paul writes them this letter – a hundred perhaps, maybe up to two hundred, but that’s all. They worshiped together in about five house churches. And this group is composed of Romans, Greeks and Jews; of males and females; of slaves and freed people and masters. In other words, the earliest church in Rome is a hodgepodge of people from diverse cultures, trying to figure out what it means to be followers of Jesus as their Lord and Savior.

They didn’t grow up in the faith. They didn’t come from nice, middle class Christian families. They didn’t go to Christian schools. They weren’t living in the middle of a culture that considered itself to be Christian.

They’re surrounded by pagans. They’re ruled by tyrants who have unbounded authority. They’re struggling among themselves for superiority and power. They’re strangers to one another with strange customs and rituals, and now, they’re being told by Paul that they’re to be sisters and brothers to one another. (This eventually becomes the root of Christians being called “incestuous.”)

And of course, one of the chief questions is “How are we as Christians to relate to the Roman Empire?” Some of the new converts benefited by being important in the Empire, but these are in the minority. Some of the new converts were raised in the Temple and taught to fight as zealots any sort of idolatry, which the Roman Empire was blanketed with. Some of the converts were

taken as slaves from who knows what background. Some grew up as pagan Romans, in a pagan Roman society, and were therefore somewhat comfortable, or at least familiar with the Roman Empire – probably even patriotic to Rome.

But now, as Christians, as followers of Jesus as their Savior and Lord, how are they to get along with the Empire?

Paul has already worked some of this out in his own life. As a follower of Jesus he had to set aside much of the zealotry he was taught as a Jewish Pharisee. He had abandoned many of the Jewish rules and laws. And his perspective on Rome changed.

As a Jewish Pharisee Rome was one of his chief antagonists. Paul was taught to work at destroying Rome. Albeit in very small, inconsequential ways, such as persecuting Christians.

But when he became an apostle to the Gentiles Paul stopped striving against Rome, and he actually used his Roman citizenship as a tool to protect himself. Paul's view of Rome has changed now that he's a Christian.

And so, when he writes a letter to this new church, he doesn't encourage the Christians to struggle against the Empire, because he knows, he knows, that such a struggle is futile. They will never have the power to crush Caesar. To Paul the Christian faith is not a tool for societal revolution.

Instead, Paul encourages the believers to get along with the Empire. He does this by emphasizing that even the Empire is established by the hand of God. It's God who's enthroned Caesar as King, and it will be God who brings him down. Paul understands that Caesar and his Empire is temporal. It won't stand forever. And Paul understands that Jesus and his Kingdom is eternal. Therefore, he tells the Romans that they shouldn't lose faith when life becomes difficult for them because God is at work, even when they cannot see that work.

So, the question remains, "How are the Christians in Rome to relate to the Roman Empire?" Well, notice the context of his words. Notice the words before and after his instruction to trust that God is at work within and throughout the Empire. Notice the tone.

In Romans 12.9-13 Paul creates a tone of love and honor and gentleness and kindness and generosity that Paul wants the church to practice with one another. He instructs these brand-new converts to learn how to love one another. Which is no easy task. And, I don't know, but I would be surprised if any other part of the Roman Empire encouraged such gentleness and love.

Then in 12.14-21, Paul draws the Christian's gaze outward towards society. Paul instructs these brand-new converts how to live in the Empire. And I think that we've heard this kind of talk for so long that the radicalness doesn't strike our ear like a gong. But it would have sounded particularly odd to these new Christians. Maybe you'll want to turn again to that passage. Page 1689. He says:

1. (14) Bless those who persecute you (including Caesar); bless and do not curse. The powers within the kingdoms do not understand this thought. They've been taught to persecute those who persecute you, and to curse them while doing so. But, Paul says, No, we're going to live differently with our enemies.
2. (15) Rejoice with the rejoicers; mourn with the mourners. The powers within the kingdoms of this world will often mourn about those who rejoice, and they will often rejoice with those who mourn. How often do we hear people filled with glee when some bad person is killed? Paul says, No. That's not how your Christians should be.
3. (16) Learn to respect everyone. Do not think of yourself as superior. Paul is again tearing down the hierarchies that elevate and denigrate people.
4. (17) Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what's right in the eyes of everyone. This is the second time he teaches them not to take revenge. (cf. v. 14)
5. (18) If possible, live at peace with everyone. Seeking shalom with everyone is a difficult pill to swallow, especially when we feel wronged. Nonetheless, that's the task of the Christians in Rome.
6. (19) Do not take revenge. This is the third time he teaches them to not take revenge. Revenge seeking is a very common reaction when we're hurt. The problem is that it often becomes a vicious, unbreakable, circle.
7. (21) Don't be overcome by evil, but, overcome evil with good. The proper response to evil is to return love.

That's what precedes Paul's instruction on how to live with the greater Roman society. It creates a tone. Can you feel it? It's filled with gentleness and generosity. It's a tone that we simply do not encounter in the governmental kingdoms of this world. It's a tone that we do not hear encouraged in society. Not then, and not now.

And then, immediately after the government instructions, Paul makes a couple more helpful comments in chapter 13.8-10, which give us further context. He says:

1. (8 & 10) Whoever loves others has fulfilled the law.
2. (9) The commandments are summed up in one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself."
3. (10) Love does no harm to its neighbor.

So, right before and right after Paul's instruction to get along with the Empire Paul tells the Christians to be loving, kind, gentle, peace loving, etc.

And we know that the church flourished right after Paul wrote this letter. Many new converts began to follow Jesus as Savior and Lord. And we can only surmise it's because the Christians in Rome were so odd. Their gentleness, their goodness, their kindness, their love became well known.

But we also know, that about 7 or 8 years after Paul's letter is read by Phoebe to the Roman churches, Nero begins his persecution of Christians. Nero himself burns down Rome, and everyone knows it, but he then places Christians on trial for the offense.

A large number were convicted on charges of "hating the human race." They were then executed. Some were clothed in the hides of animals and torn apart by dogs to the amusement of the crowds. Some were crucified. Some were even set on fire while being crucified in order to give light in Nero's gardens. And a myriad of other cruelties were practiced by the Roman Empire against the Christians.

And yet, Paul's words held the church together. Submit to the authorities as a matter of conscience because they've been established by God. And while doing this maintain your love for one another and for your fellow citizens. Such incredible instructions. (And this becomes the instructions for the Civil Rights movement in America.)

And by 313, with the emperor Constantine, the church in Rome takes off. Christendom takes hold. And the cultural deception of a Christianized Empire begins to grow.

We too live in an Empire that certainly rivals the Roman Empire. And make no mistake about it, we too live in a pagan Empire. And during the next few decades this reality will become increasingly obvious. The church is already slipping in cultural influence and it will continue to slip. Anti-Christendom is on the rise among us.

And this isn't necessarily a bad thing, because Christendom has a way of muting the Gospel. It tends to lead the church towards emphasizing spiritual, individual salvation, while silencing the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Christendom encourages us to follow two masters.

Even now, all around us, we may witness people offering lip service to Jesus as their Savior while living lives of much greater allegiance to the kingdoms of the world. Eventually, in the coming generations though, the message of Jesus as Savior will also slip from people's hearts.

I suspect that many of my Great Grandchildren will know very little about Jesus as Savior and even less about Jesus as Lord and King. Which saddens me. I've even started writing a letter to my Great Grandchildren, people I will never know, about our faith. Perhaps they'll discover it. Perhaps not.

This American Empire is not the Kingdom of God. And there are times when the American Empire is deeply flawed. There are times when we as a society abuse the innocent, crush the weak, defile the stranger, bully the foreigner. There are times when our society is deeply corrupt. There are times when our political leaders are petty, vindictive, self-centered and even, evil.

And it's especially during such times that we must remember that governments are given to this world as a blessing – even cruel governments offer a modicum of structure. We must remember that God is the one who raises up authorities. And we must remember that God is also the one who tears them apart and who eventually replaces every ruler and every authority. We must remember, always remember, that Jesus is Lord, that Jesus is King, not some President, or Prime Minister, or General. Jesus is King.

I heard James Carval this week talking about the upcoming election. And he was shouting, like Carval always does. He said that the only thing standing between America and the Abyss is the upcoming election. And if we fail to change the administration then everything may be lost.

And part of his sentiment resonated with me. But then I remembered that that's a bunch of hooey. The only thing standing between us and the abyss is God. The only thing between us and the Abyss is Jesus the King. And when I remembered that truth, suddenly everything didn't feel so bleak and threatened.

We're not called to be zealots in this world, but we're also not called to be powerless. As Peter says, "Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us." (1 Peter 2.12)

I believe that this is what Paul's actually teaching in Romans 13. Live such good lives among the pagan Romans that they will marvel and turn towards the one true King, Jesus the Messiah. We're called by God to put our trust in the Lord and to be good people.

Furthermore, it's also our calling to pray to the Lord God almighty about the suffering of this world. About the abuse of the governments. We're called to intercede before the throne of God, for the weak, the powerless, the oppressed, the downtrodden, the tired, the hungry, the overlooked.

And we do this not because God needs to be drawn into the loop. Not because God is ignorant of the suffering in this world. We do this so that by being close to God in prayer, we become more like God to the world. We do this so that our sensitivity and love for those who are suffering increases.

We intercede, not to Caesar, but to God. For God is our ultimate authority and Jesus is our King.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.