

- In this passage, Paul affirms the right of government to tax and the right to exercise capital punishment (“**do not bear the sword for no reason,**” v. 4). The institution of capital punishment predated the Mosaic covenant (cf. Gen 9:6), and Paul assumes that it is still a suitable method for punishing those who attack God’s image-bearers (Schreiner, 666). Both then (e.g., Jesus) and today, this punishment was carried out unjustly, but its inappropriate use does not invalidate God’s command to carry it out.
- As in the previous section, Paul’s teaching here likely intentionally echoes that of Jesus (cf. Mt 22:15–22), who also taught that God has given to government a specific sphere over which it rules, and we, as Jesus’ followers, must acknowledge government’s God-given responsibility. Just because governments may be corrupt and taxes may be unnecessary or used for evil means, Christians are still obligated to submit to their earthly rulers, assuming those rulers do not tell them to violate a command of God and assuming that they do not overstep the sphere over which God has given them the right to rule.⁹² Paul knows that sometimes governments do punish those who are doing good, but as a general rule if we are doing what is good, we do not need to fear human government.

E. Love and the Law (13:8–10)

- Paul returns here to the topic of love (cf. 12:9–21), but he also ties it back to his statement in **verse 7** regarding debts.
- Christians are to be people who pay their debts (**vv. 7, 8a**). Christians are allowed to borrow and have debts, but we must be people who keep our commitments and repay our debts. The only “**debt**” that we should leave “**outstanding**” is the “**continuing debt to love one another.**” In this context, there is no indication that Paul is restricting this love to other believers; instead, he is telling us that we have a “debt” to love everyone.
- We can pay other debts and be free from them, but our obligation to love others will never be fulfilled, no matter how hard we try. As one early writer put it, “Let your only debt that is unpaid be that of love—a debt which you should always be attempting to discharge in full, but will never succeed in discharging” (Origen quoted by Moo, 829).
- The reason (“**for,**” v. **8b**) Paul gives for our love is that loving our neighbor fulfills “**the law.**” Paul’s examples in **verse 9** are from the Ten Commandments, so the “**law**” is likely the Mosaic Law. Specifically, Paul refers to laws that are still in force today. Even though Paul is very clear in other places that the Mosaic Law is no longer in force (Rom

this last inference with a warning—God has given to government the right to use force against those who do evil (v. 4b). In v. 5, Paul summarizes the argument from vv. 1–4: “**it is necessary to submit to the authorities.**”

⁹² “Obeying the government is a general rule. There are two exceptions: when (1) ‘the government explicitly tells us to disobey God’ (our ultimate authority), or (2) ‘the government exceeds its jurisdiction so as to speak authoritatively into a sphere regulated by another, God-instituted authority’” (Naselli, 167). Here Naselli is quoting from a blog post by Mark Snoberger, which is available at <https://dbts.edu/2020/09/23/how-can-we-simultaneously-submit-to-every-ordinance-of-man-and-obey-god-rather-than-men/>.

7:6; 14:14; Gal 3:23–25; 2 Cor 3:4–18; Col 2:16), many of its laws, including those listed here, have carried over into the new Law of Christ. At a minimum, Paul’s point in this paragraph seems to be that genuine love for one’s neighbor will ensure that all of these other laws are carried out as well. For example, you will not murder your neighbor, steal from him, covet his possessions, or commit adultery with his spouse if you truly love him. However, the word “**fulfillment**” likely points to an additional truth. Believers who “love others as they should... bring to expression in actual life circumstances what the [Law of Moses] was all along aiming at” (Moo, 831). They are no longer under the Law of Moses, but their lives demonstrate its goal and are thus its culmination, even if imperfectly. Since our love prior to our glorification is incomplete, “we may very well require other commandments [i.e., the Law of Christ] to chastise and to guide us” (Ibid., 832). To put this another way, we as Christians still need specific commands to help us see how to love our neighbor, but we also must avoid a merely outward obedience to these commands that fails to keep the more basic duty to love.

F. Living in Light of the Day (13:11–14)

- The “**this**” that begins **verse 11** points back to everything that Paul has said in 12:1–13:10. Believers are to put all of this into practice because of the hour. Paul uses the image of a night that is almost over—dawn is approaching—to illustrate the time in which we, as Christians, live. Our former lifestyle belongs to the present age, which is just about finished. Our new lifestyle belongs to the new age, which is almost here and will last forever (**v. 12a**). In **verses 12b–13**, Paul plays on the analogy and describes specific sins commonly associated with the literal night. However, “**the deeds of darkness**” (**v. 12**) would include all sins, not just those mentioned in verse 13. As the entire section has made clear (12:1ff), believers are being called to the right affections and attitudes and not merely an avoidance of the things mentioned in verse 13.
- What does it mean that the “**day is almost here**”? The arrival of God and his Messiah to judge the wicked and restore the world was described in the OT as a “Day of the Lord” (e.g., Amos 5:18–20; Obad 15–17; Zeph 1:14–18; Zech 14) and this is another reason why Paul likely uses the day/night analogy. That promised “Day” is imminent; that is, it will come without warning. As Jesus predicted, that “Day” will come like a thief who surprises you in the middle of the night (Matt 24:42–44; cf. 1 Thess 5:2).
- In addition, Paul uses another of his favorite images, the changing of clothes (e.g., Col 3:8–12; Eph 4:22–28), to describe the transformation in the believer’s lifestyle. Here, in Romans 13, the believer is not just putting on new clothes, but he is putting on “**armor**” (**v. 12b**) and clothing himself with “**the Lord Jesus Christ**” (**v. 14**). This final exhortation reminds us “that we are consciously to embrace Christ in such a way that his character is manifested in all that we do and say” (Moo, 842). Our Lord Jesus is not only

the model for our lives, the perfect picture of what it means to fulfill God’s law, but he also is the means by which our new life is possible and our only hope of rescue when we fail. It is his righteousness that ensures that the Father accepts us.

- Notice why Paul refers to the coming of this “Day”—to encourage right behavior now! As Naselli puts it, “Some people think the Bible talks about the end times primarily to specify a ‘train schedule’ of end-times events. But the Bible talks about the end times primarily to exhort Christians to live in the present in light of the future” (170).

G. A Plea for Unity (14:1–15:13)

- Paul now begins to address a current issue in the Roman church, which was probably one of his main reasons for writing the letter. Before we apply his teaching to our own lives and congregations, we have to make sure that we understand Paul’s historical context and the situation in the Roman assemblies.
- So, what was going on in the Roman congregations that prompted Paul to write this section? We have several clues in the text:
 - Three separate but related issues were leading to disagreements in the Roman congregations: (1) eating “**anything**” vs. eating only “**vegetables**” (v. 2); (2) regarding “**one day**” above others vs. regarding “**every day**” the same (v. 5); and (3) whether or not to “**eat meat or drink wine**” (v. 21). The first issue receives the most attention. Paul describes those who take the stricter position on these three issues as those “**whose faith is weak**” (v. 1) and those with the opposite view as the “**strong**.”
 - Paul makes it clear that he agrees with the position of the “**strong**,” even if he disagrees with how they have treated the “**weak**” (14:14; 15:1).⁹³ Therefore, in principle or theologically, Paul agrees that Christians can eat all things, not observe special days, and drink wine (cf. Acts 10:9–16; Gal 4:10–11; Col 2:16–17).⁹⁴ This conclusion seems to match other places where Paul teaches that the Christian, united with Christ, is no longer under the Law of Moses (Rom 7:4; Gal 3:24–25) or places where Paul makes it clear that he no longer feels obligated always to follow the Law of Moses (1 Cor 9:19–23). Therefore, Paul is likely referring to a dispute over the Roman Christians’ relationship to the Mosaic Law.
 - This conclusion is supported by Paul’s use of the word translated “**unclean**” (three times in v. 14). He contrasts this with “**clean**” food (v. 20). “Unclean” food or

⁹³ The fact that he calls them “strong” indicates that he agrees with their theological position. “‘The strong’ . . . were strong primarily because their convictions about diet and food corresponded to what was true theologically, and this theological truth had freed them from feeling any necessity to express their faith through dietary restrictions or the observance of certain days as special” (Thielman, 628).

⁹⁴ This does not mean that they necessarily *should* eat everything or drink wine. It just means that God has not prohibited these practices. Paul himself voluntarily curtailed his liberty in eating for the sake of ministry and the glory of God, and he encouraged others to follow his example (cf. 1 Cor 9:19–23; 10:31–11:1). Therefore, a congregation might voluntarily commit together to abstain from alcohol for various reasons, but other congregations might choose not to make this restriction. There is always a difference between what is permitted and what is best in a given situation.

“common” food was how a Jewish person would refer to something ceremonially unclean or impure that should be avoided (cf. Acts 10:14, 28).⁹⁵

- The dispute was not over a legalism that distorted the gospel; it was not an attempt to earn God’s favor or grace. Otherwise, Paul would have responded strongly to condemn it as he does in the letter to the Galatians (cf. Gal 1:6–9). In Galatia, some were teaching that the believer must keep the Law of Moses to earn God’s favor, which was a false gospel. Here in Rome, believers were merely keeping portions of the Law of Moses or traditions associated with the Law because they genuinely believed that this was pleasing to God but not *necessarily* because they believed it was the basis of their justification. It was difficult to abandon long-standing traditions, especially when the “weak” believed God was pleased with the traditions.
 - We have evidence that pious Jewish people living among Gentiles would refrain from meat or wine because they feared it was not prepared according to the Law’s standards and/or offered to idols (e.g., Dan 1:8; cf. Tobit 1.10–12; Judith 12.1–2). If in doubt, they thought it was better not to eat at all!
 - Putting this all together, Moo’s conclusion regarding the situation in the Roman church seems correct, “Jewish Christians in Rome, convinced that the torah [i.e., the Law of Moses] was still authoritative for Christians, claimed that a sincere Christian should avoid meat and wine and should observe the Sabbath and Jewish holy days. Only by following such practices could a Christian avoid ritual contamination and please God. These Jewish Christians, however, ended up as a minority in the Roman church, and the dominant gentile majority thought that such requirements were a ridiculous holdover from Judaism” (*EBR*, 180; for a similar conclusion, see Schreiner, 686–89).
 - This means that the “weak” were likely made up mostly of Jewish Christians in the Roman church, and the “strong” were likely made up mainly of Gentile Christians. If the congregations were divided along these ethnic lines, it explains why Paul has emphasized the Law of Moses and these ethnic divisions in this letter. However, what Paul has to say in this section applies to other situations we may face in our churches today—situations that might not necessarily involve ethnic distinctions but involve disagreements over what truly pleases God.
1. Serving the Same Lord (14:1–12)
- The “strong” are to “**accept**” or welcome the “weak” and stop showing contempt for them. The “weak” are not “**to judge the one who does**” eat (**vv. 1–3**). It is clear from the context that Paul is using “judge” in the negative sense of “condemn” or

⁹⁵ The word is used this way in Mark 7:2, 5 (the disciples’ hands were considered “unclean” because they had not been ritually washed), Acts 10:14, 28; 11:8 (to describe the food that Peter previously would not eat but was now told was permitted), and Rev 21:27 which promises that nothing “impure” will ever enter into the New Jerusalem.