

5 Living in the world (Romans 13–14)

So how do we live the gospel reality that Jesus Christ is Lord? Romans 13 guides us to live in the present world where authorities and neighbours do not yet recognize Christ as Lord. Then Romans 14 guides us to live well with those who do recognize Christ as Lord but have different beliefs and practices.

Paul's gospel application started in Romans 12. In chapters 1–8, Paul explained God's faithfulness in providing the Messiah. God calls us to respond with faithfulness to his Messiah. That faith that sets us right, so we do right. In chapters 9–11, Paul explained how the nations have been incorporated into the people of God in the Messiah, while many from Israel have not believed the message of the Messiah.

Any questions on previous chapters before we begin?

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5.1 In the world that doesn't recognize Christ (Romans 13)

How are Christians to relate to the rulers and governments of this world? God raised up Messiah Jesus as our Lord, *appointing him the Son of God in power by raising him from the dead* (Romans 1:4). So if Jesus is Lord, does that mean Caesar is not? ⁹

Or are Christians dual citizens? Do we serve Jesus in our spiritual lives, and the government in our physical lives? Christians take different sides on these questions.

Shall we see what Romans says?

Romans 13:1-5 (NIV)

¹ Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. ² Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves.

³ For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended. ⁴ For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. ⁵ Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience.



⁹ For a discussion of this issue, see Scot McKnight and Joseph B. Modica. *Jesus Is Lord, Caesar Is Not: Evaluating Empire in New Testament Studies* (IVP Academic, 2013).

Many practical questions arise from this text:

- If *there is no authority except what God established* (verse 1), does God put tyrants like Hitler, Nero, or Nebuchadnezzar in power?
- If *rebellious against the authority is rebellious against God* (verse 2), should we obey orders even when they're evil (such as genocide)?
- If God has authorized rulers to *bear the sword* (verse 4), is it okay for Christians to join the armed forces and fight in war?

What do you think this text means for us?

Let's put the text in context. So far in Romans, we've heard a great deal about the Torah, the Law God gave to the nation of Israel in the Sinai covenant. But Romans 13 is the first time we've considered Roman law, gentile law.

Rome was proud of her legal system. *Iustitia* (or *Justitia*) was the goddess who guided justice. We get the word "justice" from her name. She was depicted with scales (weighing judicial matters), a blindfold (showing no partiality), and sometimes a sword (punishing evildoers).

When Rome conquered people, they told them they were lucky to have the Roman peace and justice (*Pax Romana* and *Iustitia*) ruling over them. This was Rome's "gospel"—the good news she proclaimed that Caesar was Lord of all because the gods had raised him up to rule the world.

Caesar's blasphemous "gospel" and his claim to be a god were offensive to Jews. They yearned for a different gospel: the good news that YHWH would save them from the nations and restore his reign over them (Isaiah 52:7). But they also believed that YHWH was the source of every authority. If Nebuchadnezzar was ruling Jerusalem, they'd say, "*The God of heaven has given you dominion and power and might and glory*" (Daniel 2:37).



When God made humans in his image, he authorized us to represent heaven's government on earth, but not to rule each other (Genesis 1:26-28). After the flood, God authorized the community to execute justice (Genesis 9:6).¹⁰ Nations then formed on the basis of the communal authority God had given (Genesis 10). That's the basis for Paul's statement *that there is no authority except that which God has established*.¹¹

So, what does this mean for us as Christians? God's gospel ("Jesus is Lord") will bring the world under his authority in the end. But right now we're living in the awkward space where not everyone recognizes him as Lord. We still need human governments handling matters of justice. When no one is in power, it's anarchy and the bullies take over. That's not our message. We're called to recognize the authorities established by God to prevent violence taking over his world.

But Scripture also shows that people can't handle the authority God gives them. It was true in the time of the Judges. It was true of Israel's kings: Saul, David, Solomon, and

¹⁰ <https://www.yaeshahar.com/noah-law-stability-lessons-cataclysm/> accessed 2025-08-02.

¹¹ Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Zondervan, 2004), 661.

the kings of the divided kingdom (Israel and Judah). It was true of the nations as they banded together to try to take over God's world (Genesis 11). Power corrupts. The kingdoms are ruled by beasts (Daniel 7). From Pharaoh to Pilate to the wars of our time, humans take power by crushing their enemies. The world needs a Saviour.

God has authorized human government, but we're not saying that God puts individuals in power. Verse 4 is better understood as referring to the office of government rather than the individual in government. Tom Wright translates:

Romans 13:4 (The Bible for Everyone)

It is God's servant, you see, for you and your good. But if you do evil, be afraid; the sword it carries is no empty gesture. It is God's servant, you see: an agent of justice to bring his anger on evildoers.

Nero was Emperor when Paul wrote these words. Within ten years, Nero turned against Christians, killing Paul, Peter and many others. While God authorized government, the text is not saying that God chose Nero, or Hitler, or any other brute.

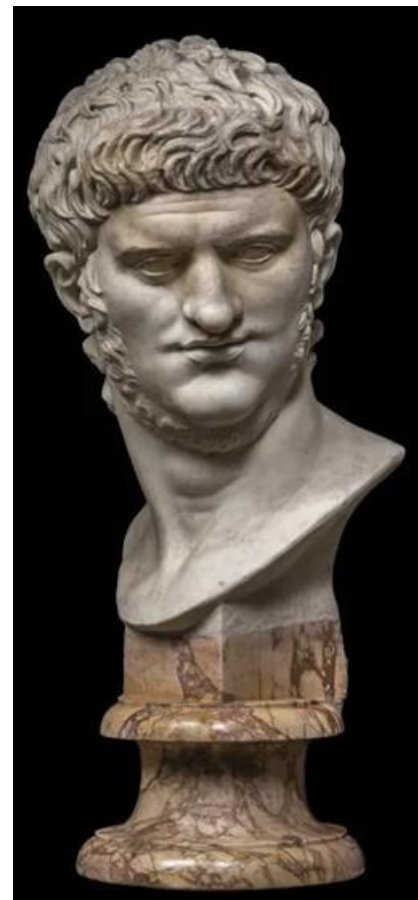
What does *bearing the sword* mean? Some have used it to justify war,¹² but verse 4 is about *bringing punishment on the wrongdoer*. God authorized taking a murderer's life (Genesis 9:6), but that's not war. War began as warriors misused the authority to kill, turning it into a means to build their kingdoms (Genesis 10:8-12).

Scripture has a conflicted view of human governments. They're necessary to limit evil, though rulers do evil like the rest of us. Heaven has appointed only one leader to save the world (Acts 4:12). All others are transitional: authorized by God for our good until every knee bows to Messiah Jesus.

Our calling is therefore to promote God's Christ, not to bring down the flawed governments that currently rule us. We're not rebels rising up to overthrow our leaders (verse 2); that only creates another flawed government. We fear their authority and obey their laws whenever we can—not only to avoid their punishment but as a matter of maintaining a good conscience before God (verse 5).

There may be times when our allegiance to God and our allegiance to government clash. If King Jesus commands us to love our enemies and the government conscripts me to kill those it defines as enemies, there's no question where my primary loyalty lies. As Peter said to the authorities in Jerusalem, "*Which is right in God's eyes: to listen to you, or to listen to him? You be the judges!*" (Acts 4:19). Yes, I'll be subject to the judgement of the earthly authority, rather than do wrong by God.

Does this approach make sense of our responsibility to the rulers of this world while maintaining our trust in Jesus as Lord of all? Your thoughts?



Sculpture of Nero (British Museum)

¹² See "Just-war tradition and the theologian" in Daryl J. Charles and Timothy J. Demy, *War, Peace, and Christianity: Questions and Answers from a Just-War Perspective* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010).

If the authorities are God's servants, then helping them fund the services they provide is a privilege, not an imposition:¹³

Romans 13:6-7 (NIV)

⁶ This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. ⁷ Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honour, then honour.

Tax collectors in Palestine were regarded as traitors: financing the Roman occupation, preventing Israel being restored as a kingdom of God. But Paul believes the kingdom of God arrived when God raised up Jesus Christ as our Lord, appointing him as the Son of God in power, so God is calling the nations to the obedience that comes from trusting his leadership (1:4-5). While that's happening, we recognize existing governments as God-appointed, and we help them finance the services they provide to the community. We might disagree with some of their funding decisions, but we're to pay our taxes and give them the honour due to the office they hold.

Are you glad to pay taxes and honour politicians? Or does that bother you?

As gospel people, our primary mode of life is to love people:

Romans 13:8-10 (NIV)

⁸ Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law.

⁹ The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery," "You shall not murder," "You shall not steal," "You shall not covet," [Exodus 20:13-17] and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: "Love your neighbour as yourself." [Leviticus 19:18]

¹⁰ Love does no harm to a neighbour.

Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.

Debt is a big deal in our culture. Economics is at the heart of our sense of value—personal and political. To keep growing the economy, we need to keep spending more, so growing debt feeds the economy. We borrow money to make money, because making money is the point of life in our culture.

In the honour/shame culture of the ancient world, life was more about relationships. The Torah said, "Do not hold back the wages of a hired worker overnight" (Leviticus 19:13). It went on to call them to take care of their neighbours the same way they take care of themselves (19:18).

That's the *debt of love* we always have, the obligation we can never fully discharge. If you love your partner, you won't be unfaithful. If you love your enemies, you won't kill them. If you love your neighbour, you'll provide for them rather than steal from them. If you value people rather than property, you won't covet their things. Loving neighbours creates the community God always intended us to be.

¹³ For a humorous comparison: <https://allenbrowne.blog/2020/08/19/jesus-did-refer-to-himself-as-a-king/>

Love turns prohibitions into possibilities. All the “*Thou shalt not ...*” laws boil down to “do no harm to your neighbour.” Therefore, *love is the fulfilment of the law* (verse 10).

The Messiah’s self-giving love permeates the community under his leadership. As people recognize him as Lord, earth is transformed into what God intended it to be. This is how we’re called to live in the present, in anticipation of that day:

Romans 13:11-14 (NIV)

¹¹ And do this, understanding the present time:

The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.

¹² The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armour of light. ¹³ Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy.

¹⁴ Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh.

A new day dawned for the earth when God raised his Messiah out of death, calling the world to recognize his Christ as our Lord, *the Son of God in power* (1:4). In baptism we were *buried with Christ into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the death through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life* (6:4).

The dark reign of Sin and Death is almost over. Heaven’s reign dawns over the earth. So, it makes no sense to offer ourselves in the service of Sin and Death anymore; *rather offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer every part of yourself to him as an instrument of righteousness* (6:13).

That’s how God saves the world: we do right (*righteousness*) because we’re set right (*justified*) through *faith[fulness]* to the Messiah. Salvation is not just about me; the Messiah is saving the world, and his vision is drawing closer every day (verse 11).

So, wake up! Get dressed for the new day. His life is already being born in us. As his community we participate in his glorious life, *clothed with the Lord Jesus Christ* who lives among us. In living to express his love, we no longer seek the prohibited things our old nature desires.

What are your thoughts about governments and political activism? How do we live in the world as the present expression of how things will be when Jesus is recognized as Lord and restores all things?

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5.2 In the world that does recognize Christ (Romans 14)

From how we relate to the community around us, Paul turns back to the crucial question of how we do life together as the community that recognizes Christ together:

Romans 14:1-4 (NIV)

¹ Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarrelling over disputable matters. ² One person's faith allows them to eat anything, but another, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. ³ The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does, for God has accepted them. ⁴ Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To their own master, servants stand or fall. And they will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand.

What would these words have meant to the people in the first-century house-churches in Rome? All letter long, Paul identified two groups (1:16; 2:9-10; 3:9, 22, 29; 9:24; 10:12). Based on those verses, the conflict was between and

One group *eats only vegetables* (v. 2). It's not because vegetarianism was popular but because the meat in the markets was ritually unclean. It may have been offered to idols, and it certainly would not be "kosher" by the standards of Leviticus 11. Living in Rome, they were doing what Daniel did in Babylon (Daniel 1:8-12). Which group is this? Jew or gentile?

The other group *eats anything* (v. 3), with no concern for the food laws in Leviticus. Which group is this?

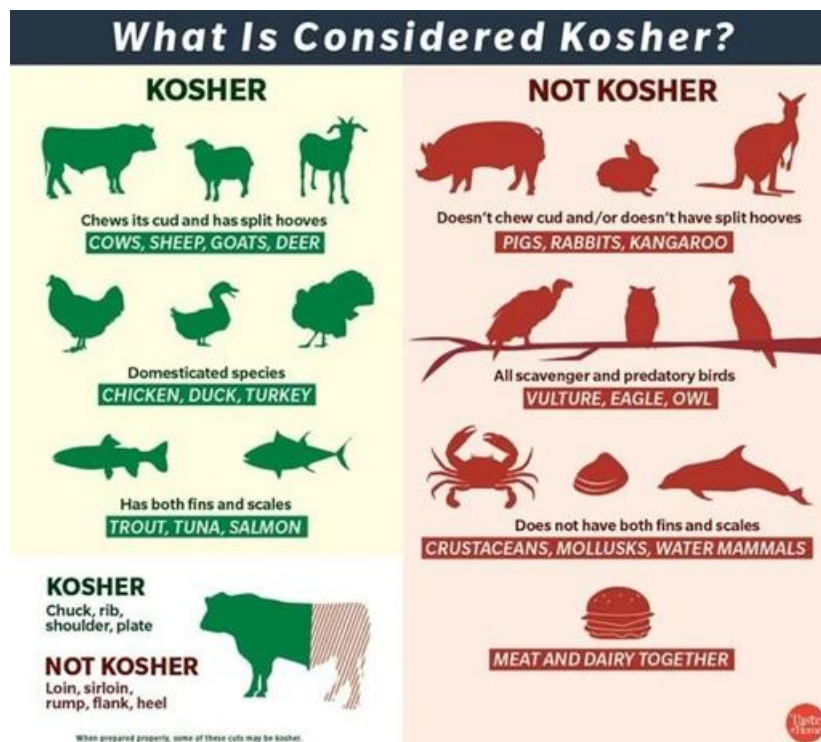
Paul's concern is that this difference is preventing them from being one community together. If they won't eat together, Jewish families will gather in one group, and gentiles in another.

This does not present Rome with a picture of the world where all people are united as one kingdom in the Messiah.

Don't underestimate how difficult this issue was for them. Years after the resurrection, God had to confront the apostle Peter's attitude to gentiles. Then Peter confronted the community in Jerusalem: "*You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean*" (Acts 10:28).

So which group does Paul label as *the weak* (14:1, 2)?

And which group does he call *the strong* (15:1)?



Does this surprise you? The Jewish Christians were trying harder, wanting to be faithful to the stronger requirements of the Torah for the Jewish people. Why does Paul see them as those *whose faith is weak* (verse 2)?

For Paul, *faith* means loyalty to the Messiah. Whether Jew or gentile, faith[fulness] to Christ forms us into one people of God in the Messiah. We express our unity as children of one Father by sharing meals with each other. Gentiles cannot demean Jewish culture as meaningless, and Jews cannot reject gentiles as unclean. As God told Peter, “*Do not call anything impure that God has made clean*” (Acts 10:15; 11:9).

The gentiles are in the stronger position since they simply trust the Messiah without trying to perform all the works of the law. The Jewish believers who refuse to associate with gentiles in order to comply with the Torah's purity laws have the weaker faith because the gentiles are completely trusting the Messiah who fulfilled the Law for us.

This is exactly the opposite of the power claims the returning Jews in Rome were making. Paul is turning power on its head. As the Common English Bible puts it in Romans 15:1: “*We who are powerful need to be patient with the weakness of those who don't have power*”. More important than who is right and who is wrong is how the weak and the strong treat each other.

We don't have to agree; we have to relate to each other the way God relates to us:

Romans 14:5-9 (NIV)

⁵ One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind. ⁶ Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord. Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God; and whoever abstains does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God. ⁷ For none of us lives for ourselves alone, and none of us dies for ourselves alone. ⁸ If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. ⁹ For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living.

Some considered the **Sabbath** to be more sacred than other days (verse 5). Can you guess which group that would be? The Sinai Covenant required Israel to observe the Sabbath, so this became part of Jewish culture. The covenant that God established in the Messiah has no such requirement. Jewish people may want to practice the Sabbath as part of their culture, but they cannot expect gentiles to keep the Sabbath or observe the other feast days that were important in the Jewish calendar.

Conversely, gentiles cannot demean Jewish believers who choose to devote a day to God. They're not doing something wrong; they're offering God a beautiful gift by devoting a day to him each week.

In the same way, Jewish believers cannot project the Levitical food laws on gentiles, because God never required those laws of gentiles. At the same time, gentiles cannot treat their Jewish brothers and sisters as inferior when the families they grew up in restrict themselves to only foods they consider clean.

Neither group is wrong. Both groups are offering themselves to the Lord, rather than living for themselves. That's exactly what God calls us to do (verses 7-8). Isn't that what Jesus did (verse 9)?

What do you think about this? Keeping the Sabbath was one of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20; Deuteronomy 5). Do you think Christians should keep the Ten Commandments? What about the food laws? What about circumcision? How much of the Old Testament laws should Christians be required to keep?

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Each of us should develop our own understanding of what pleases God, but we don't have authority to impose our perspective on each other:

Romans 14:10-12 (NIV)

¹⁰ You, then, why do you judge your brother or sister?

Or why do you treat them with contempt?

For we will all stand before God's judgment seat.

¹¹ It is written:

'As surely as I live,' says the Lord, 'every knee will bow before me;
every tongue will acknowledge God.' [Isaiah 45:23]

¹² So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God.

As much as we love to condemn people for what we think they should be doing, it's an act of rebellion for a human to climb up onto God's judgment throne and pronounce judgment on another servant of God. As Paul explained back in 2:1-4, our impatience with each other does not reflect God's patient judgements.

Romans 14:13 (NIV)

¹³ Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister.

If I do wrong to you, the natural human response is to do wrong in return. That's the *stumbling block* I've put in your path to trip you up. The judgement I pass on you is a trap, pulling you into responding by judging me too. We drag each other down with our judgements.

Truth is, caring for each other as brothers and sisters in Father's family is more important than our opinions:

Romans 14:14 (NIV)

¹⁴ I am convinced, being fully persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for that person it is unclean.

Nothing is unclean in itself is a very radical redefinition of the purity laws that occupy many chapters in the Torah (e.g. Leviticus 11–15). Pork and rodents. Shellfish and catfish. Birds of prey. None of these things are unclean in themselves? They're only unclean if people believe they're unclean? Oh, my! I wonder if some of Paul's Jewish friends got up and walked out as Phoebe read them this paragraph.

Remember how hard this was for Peter to grasp? God gave him a vision:

Acts 10:11-15 (NIV)

¹¹ He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. ¹² It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds.

¹³ Then a voice told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat."

¹⁴ "Surely not, Lord!" Peter replied. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean."

¹⁵ The voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."

Who defines what's clean and what's unclean? Not Peter. Not Israel. God declared certain things unclean for Israel. God never declared those things unclean for the nations. Jewish believers have no authority to label things unclean for gentiles, or to treat gentiles as "unclean" when God cleanses Jews and gentiles in Christ.

God has authority to cleanse the foods. *Jesus declared all foods clean* (Mark 7:19).

God has authority to cleanse gentiles. Jesus is cleansing the nations (Luke 24:47).

When God cleanses us, we cannot treat each other as unclean. God calls us to model his acceptance of each other, as Jesus did in a culture where *Jews do not associate with Samaritans* (John 4:9). As he did, they saw *the Saviour of the world* (John 4:42).

Each of us is welcome to our own views, but we're not welcome to reject others who see things differently:

Romans 14:15-18 (NIV)

¹⁵ If your brother or sister is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love.

Do not by your eating destroy someone for whom Christ died.

¹⁶ Therefore do not let what you know is good be spoken of as evil.

¹⁷ For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit,

¹⁸ because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and receives human approval.

Verse 17 would have been controversial. In Old Testament times, *the kingdom of God* was established by the Sinai covenant, so it did have laws about eating and drinking. When the kingdom fell to the nations, there was a ruler around 168 BC who tried to force them to abandon their unique identity and meld in with the nations.

This quotation is from the history of the time (not part of our Bible):

4 Maccabees 5:1-3 (NRSV)

¹ The tyrant Antiochus ... ² ordered the guards to seize each and every Hebrew and to compel them to eat pork and food sacrificed to idols.

³ If any were not willing to eat defiling food, they were to be broken on the wheel and killed.

Under such pressure, four boundary markers became the identifying characteristics of the people of God: avoiding defiling foods, observing the Sabbath, maintaining ethnic

purity, and male circumcision. This is why it was so difficult for the Jewish believers to sit at table with gentiles and their unclean food.

But Paul insists that Christ has restored God's reign (the kingdom of God) to the earth. A physical descendant of David, Jesus was raised up out of death and appointed *the Son of God in power*. As the Lord of all people, he *calls all the nations to the obedience that comes from allegiance to his name*. Jews and gentiles who trust his leadership are his kingdom, *loved by God and called his holy people* (Romans 1:1-7).

Food laws, Sabbath observance, ethnic purity, and circumcision are no longer the boundary markers of God's people. The new kingdom of God in Christ is not defined by laws about eating and drinking. It is defined by:

- being set right with God (*righteousness*),
- being at *peace* with God (and therefore each other),
- the *joy* of being Spirit-birthed children of God (rather than slaves to evil).

The Father then calls us to treat each other as he has treated us: treating each other right (*righteousness*), living at *peace* with each other, sharing our lives and our daily bread with each other with *joy*.

Here's Paul's conclusion about how we're to live with each other as God's people:

Romans 14:19-23 (NIV)

¹⁹ Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. ²⁰ Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a person to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. ²¹ It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother or sister to fall.

²² So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who does not condemn himself by what he approves. ²³ But whoever has doubts is condemned if they eat, because their eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin.

How does this work out in practice? How does this approach apply to us today?

Other than food laws, what divides Christians today? How are we to treat each other? Are there some issues where we can't just agree to disagree, issues like the one Paul raised in 1 Corinthians 5:2? What do you think?

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5.3 So What?

When a group of us visited Israel in 2017, we saw how the Torah has shaped Jewish culture. “Do not cook a young goat in its mother’s milk,” the Torah said (Exodus 23:19; 34:26; Deuteronomy 14:22). To ensure people kept this threefold rule, the Rabbis advised people to use different dishes for meat and dairy to avoid cross-contamination. So, if the hotel buffet breakfast included milk for cereal, there would be no meat and only margarine for the toast. And after a dinner that included roast lamb, the buffet may have sorbet but not ice cream.

“This man must die,” Numbers 15:35 said. he had violated the Sabbath by gathering wood to make a fire. The Rabbis concluded that starting a fire on Shabat was a serious offence, so they warned people to avoid creating a spark of any kind. Flicking a switch to complete an electrical circuit could make a spark, so the Rabbis advised people to never do that on Shabat. The hotels therefore provide Shabat lifts that stop at every floor on Shabat so no one needs to press a button.

Even Jews who don’t have a faith share in this culture. They stop work mid-afternoon on Friday, and head home to share time with family as Shabat begins at sundown. Much of Jewish culture is shaped by Torah.

As some Jews in the first century recognized Jesus as the Messiah sent by God for his people, they were already steeped in Torah culture. They thought in terms of how far they could travel on the Sabbath (Acts 1:12). They still went to the temple (Acts 2:46; 3:1; 5:20; 21:26-30; 22:17) or attended a synagogue on the Sabbath (Acts 13:14, 27, 42, 44; 15:21; 16:13; 17:2; 18:4). They still ate only what the Torah classified as clean (Acts 9:14), and stayed away from the unclean houses of gentiles (Acts 10:28; 11:3).

What are your thoughts about Jewish culture?

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What divides Christians today? Are there some things we can’t compromise, such as recognizing Jesus Christ as our Lord? Who decides which issues are non-negotiable, and which issues we can agree to disagree about? How do we live the good news of Jesus Christ in a way that’s credible to the world around us?

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Jewish and Arab youth sing together for peace: the Jerusalem Youth Chorus

For next week, read the final two chapters of Romans.