

PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES
TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME
YEAR A

Second Reading Romans 13: 8–10

Over the centuries, Paul's Letter to the Romans has been regarded as one of the most influential. It was written before any of the Gospels, probably around 57–58 AD in Corinth, when Paul was near the end of his third missionary journey around the Eastern Mediterranean. It was addressed to the Church in Rome, which included both Jews and Gentiles. It is unusual in that it was written to a Church which Paul had yet to visit.

Most of Chapter 13 deals with the way Christians should act in public. Verses 1–7 examine the obligations of Christians towards civil authorities. In today's passage Paul looks at behaviour towards others.

The only obligation there is mutual love. In this, they fulfil the Law of Moses, as expressed in Leviticus 19: 18: *'You must love your neighbour as yourself'*. In the Old Testament, this only applied to 'the children of your people' but Paul extends it to all, Christians or not. This idea is also expressed in his letter to the Galatians (5: 14).



The commandments are quoted as they appear in Exodus (20:13–17): love encompasses everything that the Law and the commandments stand for.

In later verses, Paul spells out the sort of behaviour which would break these commandments: *'drunken orgies, promiscuity or licentiousness, wrangling or jealousy'* (Romans 13: 13). The Roman elite of the time, following the excesses of their emperor Nero, were only too ready to forget the basic requirements of the Law as expressed in Leviticus.

Gospel Matthew 18: 15–20

The eighteenth chapter of Matthew's Gospel is often called 'The Sermon on the Church'. It mainly concerns teachings about how to resolve conflicts between individuals, or between people and their Christian community in the spirit of Christ. Verses 15 to 35 are only to be found in Matthew.

This week's passage is framed with two parables emphasizing mercy, forgiveness and restoring to the fold the one who was lost: the parable of the lost sheep and that of the unforgiving debtor. It can be divided into three sections:

1. Resolving conflict

In a society where saving face and not having one's honour publicly sullied was extremely important, Jesus proposes conflict resolution in three steps:

i. Speak to your brother alone.

The term 'brother' here indicates a close relation, a friend, someone from the close-knit community of Christians. Matthew has already mentioned a similar one-to-one approach to disputes earlier on. (Matthew 5: 23–24)

ii. Take two or three witnesses with you.

Matthew, who writes for a Jewish community, refers here to the instructions given in Deuteronomy 19: 15. The evidence of two witnesses is required to sustain the charge against someone.

iii. Report the conflict to the whole community.

At the time of Matthew, these communities of believers would be quite small, no more than 20–30 people. Being treated 'like a pagan or a tax collector' is a standard phrase, meaning all those unacceptable to a Jewish community.

We remember that Jesus welcomed tax collectors (Matthew 9: 10–13). The focus here is on listening to one another, and on doing everything possible to bring back the offending brother, the one lost sheep.

2. Loosing and binding

In this passage binding and loosing mean respectively condemning and acquitting. Just as Jesus had given Peter the power to condemn and forgive (Matthew 16: 19), the disciples, having received the Holy Spirit, are empowered to do the same.

3. Prayer of the Community

It was a traditional Jewish belief that God was present among them when they studied the Law. The prayer of the community has great power, but the group need not be large. Two or three people is as small a number as is possible to call a community.