

THE BOOK OF ROMANS

Romans 13

Comments on Romans 13

Romans 13:1 Let every soul be in subjection to the higher powers: for there is no power but of God; and the *powers* that be are ordained of God.

2 Therefore he that resisteth the power, withstandeth the ordinance of God: and they that withstand shall receive to themselves judgment.

The Christians Attitude Toward and Relationship With Civil Authorities (13:1-7)

Some view the opening verses of chapter 13 as a discontinuity that doesn't belong in the Roman letter. Chapter 12 concludes with a major discussion of love (9-21). Love again becomes the subject in 13:8. 13:1-7 with its emphasis on the "sword" doesn't seem to belong in this context. Remember, however, that chapter 12 concluded with an exhortation to the Christian to be at peace and not to take vengeance upon those who mistreat them. That, Paul says, is best left to the Lord. It is thus natural for Paul in this context to tell the Christians how God is going to accomplish this vengeance. Thus, verses 1-7.

Remember also that Paul is now discussing the various relationships that the Christian has. One very important relationship is the Christian's relation to earthly government. Would Paul's discussion be complete without it? Certainly such a discussion is significant in an environment in which Christians were apt to be charged with sedition and treason. Paul did not want to Christians to leave the impression that they were opposed to a properly functioning Roman government.

As long as the church was composed mainly of Jews, the problem of subjection to earthly authority was not as great as it was to become. This is not to say that the Jews did not chafe under the yoke of Rom. It is to say that an accommodation of sorts had been established for their somewhat peaceful coexistence. The position of the Jews was regulated by a succession of imperial edicts. They enjoyed special privileges even though they were a nation under subjection. Jewish communities had the status of *collegia licita* (“permitted associations”). Jewish practices might seem silly and superstitious to the Romans, but the Romans protected those practices by imperial law. Imperial law even forbade Roman governors to bring military banners with the emperor’s image emblazoned on them within the confines of the city of Jerusalem. Rome even honored Jewish law to the extent that a Gentile deserving death under the Jewish law for trespassing within the inner courts of the temple would be put to death even if the Gentile were a Roman citizen.

In the first generation after the establishment of the church, Roman law hardly took cognizance of Christians at all, but when it did it considered them little more than if not altogether as a sect of the Jews. (Acts 18:12-17.)

There was, however, another side to the relationship between the church and Rome. Christianity started out with a handicap because its founder had been convicted and executed for sedition by a

Roman judge. Whatever the nature of the kingship claimed by Christ, the record of him known by Roman law was that he had led a movement that challenged the sovereign rights of Caesar. When Tacitus, many years later, wanted to identify Christians, he stated that they derived their name from one “Christ who was executed under the Procurator Pontius Pilate when Tiberius was emperor.” Several years before this letter when Paul’s enemies at Thessalonica wished to stir up trouble for Paul and his companions, they informed the city magistrates that Paul was defying Caesar’s decrees, saying that there was another king, one Jesus. Acts 17:7. It was certainly essential, therefore, that the Christian’s relationship to the government, to the extent that it could, should be above reproach.

Paul places this obligation on the highest plane. Government is ordained by God, no government exists apart from the will of God, and one who disobeys the government thus disobeys God. Paul does not have under consideration those circumstances under which the government arrogates to itself the position of God (whether it be dictatorship or democracy). That is governed by Peter’s proclamation in Acts 5:29. However, Peter echoed this very instruction of Paul. He instructed Christians to be subject to government and not to suffer for wrongdoing. But he recognized that there would be circumstances where we must suffer as a Christian rather than submit. 1 Pet. 2:13-14; 4:15-16.

3 For rulers are not a terror to the good work, but to the evil. And wouldst thou have no fear of the power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise from the same:

4 for he is a minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is a minister of God, an avenger for wrath to him that doeth evil.

Let us not proceed without remembering that these admonitions and instructions were written to those living under the cruel yoke of Rome. Peter and Paul both knew that cruelty well when they wrote and were to discover its greatest wrath in their deaths. Moreover, they knew of the wicked hands that had crucified and slayed the Lord of Glory.

Still, Paul describes earthly government as a terror to evil conduct and not to good (v. 3). Government punishes, but the general rule is that those who are punished have no one to blame but themselves. Even when that is not the case, *e.g.* in Paul's own experience, authorities often thought that they were punishing evildoers. In Philippi where Paul and Silas were beaten and imprisoned, the authorities had been led astray by a mob to the point that they believed Paul and Silas to be wrongdoers. When they discovered their mistake they sought to correct it (Acts 16:38-39).

The civil servant is God's servant for good (v. 4). Under normal conditions, the government represents God's will with respect to the people's conduct as citizens. To Timothy Paul described the effect of government as enabling Christians to "lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and gravity." 1 Tim. 2:2.

The wrongdoer, however, must remember that government does not bear the

sword in vain. The government bears the sword to instill the fear of wrongdoing, and to punish in the event wrong is done.

In the N.T. the use of the sword is often connected with putting one to death. Luke 21:24; Acts 12:2; 16:27; Rev. 13:10. See also Heb. 11:34 where “escap[ing] from the edge of the sword” is the equivalent of “escaped death.” The imposition of the death penalty upon criminals who commit horrendous crimes is based not only on Gen. 9:6, but also on Rom. 13:4. The government brings God’s wrath upon the practitioner of evil – the ruler is God’s servant to bring wrath.

The sanction that scripture gives to the forcible punishment of evil even to the point of life-taking is puzzling to many. They allege a contradiction between the way of love Christ imposed on his followers, his demand that evil not be returned for evil, and the permitting if not commanding the execution of wrongdoers in carrying out and imposing the wrath of God. If nothing else, this comes from a failure to recognize the difference between the salvation of the world and the preservation of the world (society). Scripture affirms both and describes both as the work of God.

The Christian must be subject to governmental authorities not only to avoid God’s wrath, but also for the sake of conscience (v. 5). Clearly, then, submission to civil authority has something to do with the Christian’s relationship to God. Failure to submit raises the accusing voice of

5 Wherefore ye must needs be in subjection, not only because of the wrath, but also for conscience' sake.

6 For this cause ye pay tribute also; for they are ministers of God's service, attending continually upon this very thing.

conscience (see 14:23). A Christian's enlightened conscience is related to his sense of obligation to God. Peter expressed it this way: "Be subject to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake" 1 Pet. 2:13.

In v. 6 Paul addresses the dreaded subject of paying taxes. Tax collectors are God's ministers (the original word that has religious implications, see Rom. 12:1; Heb. 1:7, 14). Thus Paul emphasizes once more that government ultimately owes its authority to God, not to people, and that they will ultimately answer to God, not to people, for their conduct. John Calvin, in his commentary on this passage, reminds authorities, "It yet behoves them to remember, that whatever they receive from the people, is as it were public property, and not to be spent in the gratification of private indulgence. For we see the use for which Paul appoints these tributes which are to be paid – even that kings may be furnished with means to defend their subjects."

7 Render to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute *is due*; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor.

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8 Owe no man anything, save to love one another: for he that loveth his neighbor hath fulfilled the law.

In connection with monetary obligations Paul enjoins the payment of whatever is owed to whomsoever it is due (v. 7). Paying public obligations is never sufficient in and of itself. You cannot pay taxes and feel that you have purchased the right to treat government in any manner and have any attitude that you wish toward authority. You must also fear and honor duly constituted authority.

9 For this, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not covet, and if there be any other commandment, it is summed up in this word, namely, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.

10 Love worketh no ill to his neighbor: love therefore is the fulfilment of the law.

The Christian's Attitude
Toward Everybody (13:8-10)

Verse 8 begins with a figure of speech called litotes – an affirmative is expressed by the denial of its contrary. We use one every time we respond “not bad” when asked how we are doing. Paul does not condemn honest debt. In fact, he does not discuss in this section the Christian’s relation to borrowing and repaying money except in general principles such as Rom. 12:17 (Take thought for things honorable in the sight of all men). Here Paul negates all other debt in emphasizing the debt each of us has and each of us is obligated to pay – love of neighbor.

Indeed, the debt is so important that its payment fulfills the law. If we love our neighbor we do not commit adultery with a neighbor’s spouse, we do not kill our neighbor, we do not steal or covet our neighbor’s property (vv. 9-10). One cannot love another person and intentionally hurt him or her. That doesn’t mean that we cannot cause pain to one whom we love. Peter is proof enough of that.

This proves that every negative command (“thou shalt not”) has as its root a positive command – thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. It goes without saying that we will love ourselves even in spite of our shortcomings. Shortcomings may mean that we do not like a person, but we should love that person none-the-less.

But why should the Christian worry about law? Have we not learned that the

11 And this, knowing the season, that already it is time for you to awake out of sleep: for now is salvation nearer to us than when we *first* believed.

12 The night is far spent, and the day is at hand: let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light.

13 Let us walk becomingly, as in the day; not in revelling and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and jealousy.

14 But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to *fulfil* the lusts *thereof*.

Christian is freed from law? In truth and in fact we have not. We have learned that law is not the basis of our judgment – we don't have to be perfect. We have also learned that there is an obedience of faith.

Obedience both implies and demands a standard. God's moral law has never changed. Moses law began at Sinai and ended at Calvary. God's moral law for man upon the earth began at creation and lasts until Christ's return.

The Christian's Attitude Toward the Lord Jesus Christ (13:11-14)

“And [do] this” establishes a close connection between these and the preceding verses. Love your neighbor not only because the law demands and is fulfilled by it, but also because you recognize the critical times in which you live. Paul exhorts us in view of the time, to awaken and lay aside our sinful practices and to advance in sanctification (v. 12). Our salvation, he says, is now nearer than when we first believed (v. 11).

Is Paul here looking at the end times? Possibly, but not necessarily. He could be referring to impending disaster. Nero's rampage was just around the corner. He could be referring to the death of the Christian. In any event he is not teaching that the return of Christ was imminent when he wrote. Is it likely that the knowledge that was withheld from Jesus (the time of that day) would be granted to Paul, his servant? Paul's entire thrust is a sense of urgency.

The night is past, the day has dawned, the time is here. The emphasis is not upon the end of the world but upon the necessity of each Christian's walking in a becoming manner.

The Christian is to clothe himself in the Lord Jesus Christ (Gal. 3:26-27), and make no provision for fulfilling the lusts of the flesh. Temptation is an ever present reality; succumbing to temptation is not an ever present necessity. 1 Cor. 10:13. If we are children of God we will find a way to control the enticements of pleasure (satisfaction of physical appetites), power (desire to shine and be dominant), and possessions (yearning for material possession and the prestige that accompanies them).

Instead, we sing:

Jesus is all the world to me,
My life, my joy, my all;
He is my strength from day to day
Without Him I would fall.

-- Will L. Thompson