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Romans 13: The Christian's Relationship to Authority

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Chapter 13 The Christian's relation to Authority

It would be easy for Paul to yield to the temptation to rebel against the pagan, abusive authority of Rome, but God's revelation to Paul was just the opposite of natural reactions. Paul taught a submissive position to present authority wherever the believer is located.

I. The Christian's relation to authority (Rom 13:1-7)

Rome was the capital of the empire and Nero was the emperor who reigned from AD 54-68. At first Nero was benevolent toward Christians, but that would change as things become difficult for him. There was much glory in Rome, as there was shame. Believers who were citizens of Rome were also citizens of Christ's kingdom (Phil 3:20; Col 1:13), which inevitable created conflicts. Before beginning this section, read the subject of the Christian to secular authorities is that is also discussed in 1 Tim 2:1-4 and 1 Pet 2:13-17.

13:1-3 How does a Christian understand human authorities?

^{NET} **Rom 13:1** Let every person **be subject** to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except by **God's appointment**, and the authorities that exist have been **instituted by God**.

² So the person who resists such authority **resists the ordinance of God**, and those who resist will incur **judgment**

³ (for rulers cause no fear for good conduct but for bad). Do you desire not to fear authority? **Do good** and you will **receive its commendation**,

13:1 Principle of submission to authorities. The command is to "be subject to" governing authorities (*hupotasso*, "arrange under, be subordinate, submit to one's control"). In the disconnected house churches of Rome Paul needed to make sure a subculture of rebellion did not provoke a reaction from authorities that would destroy the spreading of the gospel.

- **Submission** is a broad concept in the NT. Write out all of the areas that the believer is expected to be submission (using this same word) in the following verses:
 1 Cor 14:34
 1 Cor 16:16
 Eph 5:21
 Eph 5:24
 Col 3:18
 Titus 2:5
 Titus 2:9
 Titus 3:1
 James 4:7
 1 Peter 2:13
 1 Peter 2:18
 1 Peter 3:1
 1 Peter 5:5
- **The phrase "governing authorities" translates "higher powers."** This is clearly defined in Titus 3:1, "rulers and authorities" (KJV adds "magistrates"). Peter clarifies this submission further in 1 Peter 2:13 where one is to be subject to "every human institution"

as well as to “kings or rulers” (specific governing authorities). How should one respond to unjust rulers?

- **Though it may not be recognized, the providence of God works equally** in the lives of the unsaved and the saved. Notice how God describes His controlling the circumstances of David to bring him to the throne in 1 Sam 12:7-8. Did David receive all the authority that God wanted to give him?
- **Paul gives a reiterated statement:** “there is no authority except by God’s appointment, and the authorities that exist have been instituted by God.” Believers can live peacefully in a democracy, a constitutional monarchy or even a totalitarian regime. No government is perfect. This was written in the historical context of Nero who blamed the Christians for the fire that destroyed half of Rome (though he probably ordered it). He had believers dipped in tar then ignited to illuminate his orgies. Others were wrapped in animal skins then thrown to wild starving dogs to be torn to pieces, and many more spectacles of cruel torture. Yet the command remains.

13:2 To resist this authority is to resist God. The word “resist” (*antitassomai*, “to arrange in battle against or oppose”) There is one exception. However, even in this exception one must be prepared to pay a high price without complaint. The word “judgment” (*krima*, “decree, sentence, penal judgment from a lawsuit”) is probably a reference to what human authorities will do (“damnation” in the KJV has led to misunderstandings). There is no hint of approval to rebel against a government or attempt to overthrow it. In Acts 5:29 what is that single exception of obligated submission?

13:3 As a general rule, those who are obedient to the rules have no fear of being caught or exposed, rather will often be commended by the authorizes as a model for others. Governments are instituted to promote virtues and restrain wickedness. It must be remembered that the believer’s kingdom is not the present government, but we are merely passing through this time fame to a perfect kingdom where Jesus will rule. Is this an absolute promise (works every time) or a general principle (should work except for perverted leaders or uncontrollable circumstances)? ____ Do these verses shed any light?
 Prov 3:24 (comp. 3:21-23)
 Prov 20:2
 Prov 24:21

13:4-5 Civil leaders are God’s servants

^{NET} **Rom13:4** for it is God's **servant** for your good. But if you do wrong, be in **fear**, for it does not bear the sword in vain. It is God's servant to administer **retribution** on the wrongdoer.

⁵ Therefore it is necessary to be in **subjection**, not only because of the wrath of the authorities but also because of your conscience.

Generally speaking a citizen should not fear the leaders if they obey their ordinances or laws. There are two types of disobedience: (1) Unconscious or intentional disobedience of laws that are known and typically obeyed, (2) Unjust laws that are disobeyed intentionally

or inevitably in the pursuit of a just cause. The leader, king, authority is called a “minister” (*diakonos*, “one who executed the commands of another”) which is the same word used of the early church leaders in Acts 6. Anyone will be in trouble if they do evil (*kakos*, “something that ought not to be, bad nature, troublesome, injurious, destructive”). Does this mean the Ten Commandments or national laws?

- Why does someone in the first century carry a sword on his side? (see Heb 11:37)
- What could this verse imply concerning the right of a civil authority to grant capital punishment?
- What are the two reasons for being submissive to the laws of the land in this verse?
 - 1.
 - 2.
- An uncomfortable character of God is revealed in this passage: He is also a God of wrath. As a servant of God, he must carry out God’s justice (even if it may seem unjust at the moment). The civil authority is called an “revenger”, or avenger (*ekdikos*, “one who extracts righteousness or a just penalty”). Why does God institute authorities in governments to hold up the fear of wrath? Is it necessary? What, then, do these verses imply about our relationship with God?

Prov 2:5
Psa 36:1
Ecc 8:12
- The second reason for being submissive is for “conscience” sake (*suneidesis*, “consciousness of seeing things together,” that is, to have the mind and conscious agreed on what is right and wrong). If the conscious is violated, what happens according to these verses?

1 Tim 4:2
Titus 1:15
Heb 13:18

13:6-7 The Christian is responsible for more than obedience

^{NET} **Rom 13:6** For this reason you also **pay** taxes, for the authorities are God’s servants devoted to **governing**.

⁷ **Pay** everyone what is owed: **taxes** to whom taxes are due, **revenue** to whom revenue is due, **respect** to whom respect is due, **honor** to whom honor is due.

13:6 The exhortation to pay taxes, as Jesus demonstrated in Matt 22:21. Governing would be impossible without resources. Ideally, the governing should protect and provide the opportunity to gain more income, which results in more taxes for the government. Again the reiteration of civil authorities being God’s “ministers” (*leitourgos*, “one busy with holy things, of priests and of servants of a king”). The use of a religious term for ministers implied there was a sacred aspect to paying taxes. The imperative verb “pay” is *teleo*, “bring to an end, or pay in full.” Why would paying taxes be so important in this context?

- The full-time public servant (“devoted to governing,” *proskartereo*, “give unremitting care to a thing”) need public support to provide the essential environment needed to mature and evangelize. What are the reasons for praying for civil leaders in 1 Tim 2:1-3?
- In a special emphasis by reiteration, Paul lists four things we are to give to civil authorities (focus of the context). What are these four things and how can we do it?
 - 1.
 - 2.
 - 3.
 - 4.

II. The Christian’s response to others (13:8-14)

Not only does the Christian have a moral responsibility to civil authorities, but also to other people.

13:8-10 The exhortation to love other people

^{NET} **Rom 13:8** Owe no one anything, except to love one another, for the one who loves his neighbor has **fulfilled** the law.

⁹ For the commandments, "Do not commit adultery, do not murder, do not steal, do not covet," (and if there is any other commandment) are summed up in this, "Love your neighbor as yourself."

¹⁰ Love does no wrong to a **neighbor**. Therefore love is the **fulfillment** of the law.

13:8 The problem of debt unpaid is a lack of honor, respect, love of others and respect for God. The Greek says, “Do not keep on owing anyone anything”). This is not a prohibition against using credit, but rather of abusing credit. Creditor’s like debtors. It is not an abuse until payments are not made. Whatever you owe this month, if paid, keep you out of debt. When Elisha told the widow to fill all the vessels she could find with oil, what did he tell her to **FIRST** do with the miracle gift of oil in 2 Kings 4:7?

- What is the one debt that is allowable among Christians that can probably never be repaid? (13:8)

13:9 The proof that love fulfills the Law is seen in how to choose to act toward each other in the Ten Commandments. The 7th, 6th, 8th and 10th commandments are cited (Ex 20:13-15, 17) which show the social responsibilities toward others in the Law. Paul sums up the Jewish Law in the expression “love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev 19:18). Fourteen times in the Old and New Testament this command is reiterated. This “love” (*agapao*) is a decision to act for the benefit of another regardless of what you feel towards that person (i.e. “love your enemies” in Matt 5:31). How does a “neighbor” benefit if you obey the four commandments cited in this verse?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

- We evidence our love for ourselves by constantly taking care of ourselves (when we are hungry we get food; when we tired we rest; when we want to play, we play, etc.). Now we are commanded just as we take care of ourselves or benefit ourselves with our daily decisions, now we are to make decisions to take care of (love) others with the same interest. At least 18 times this command is reiterated in the NT. How does Gal 5:13 make this command a little clearer?

13:10 Love does no “harm” (*kakos*, “mode of thinking, base, troublesome, injurious, pernicious, destructive”). There is no thought of “getting even” or “I’ll get you.” When a person gets mad at another, can his reaction ever be right? See James 1:20 for the answer.

- Only a distorted view of the law motivated the “eye for eye” view of vengeance that has destroyed countless lives. Does God expect us to “fulfill” (*pleroma*, “as a ship is manned with sailors, rowers and cargo, be abundant”) the Ten Commandments? (See 8:4 and 13:8 for the answer)

13:11-14 Living in the light of the Second Coming

^{NET} **Rom 13:11** And do this **because** we know the time, that it is already the hour for us to awake from sleep, for our salvation is now nearer than when we became believers.

¹² The night has advanced toward dawn; the day is near. So then **we must** lay aside the **works of darkness**, and put on the **weapons of light**.

¹³ Let us **live decently** as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in discord and jealousy.

¹⁴ Instead, **put on** the Lord Jesus Christ, and **make no provision** for the flesh **to arouse** its desires.

13:11 The special REASON for demonstrating the divine love towards others is the imminent return of Christ. How do we know that when Paul refers to knowing the “time,” he is referring to the Second Coming? How does Paul use this term in these verses?

1 Cor 4:5

1 Tim 6:19

- **The term “time”** (*kairos*, “a point of time or a period of time” depending on the context) to refer to a new period of time (the daylight) is about to begin. Paul saw his “hour” as the last period before a new dawn. Everything will change at dawn. A new age or time will soon begin. The urgency and motivation to act constructively and purposefully with our lives is increased due to the coming “dawn” or “day of Jesus Christ” (Phil 1:6, 10). Check out the motives in these verses concerning the coming daylight of a new age:

Phil 2:16

1 Thes 5:2

1 Thes 5:4-5

- **In this metaphor we are still in the darkness**, but not of the darkness. The night metaphor in this context refers to the world without Christ. The concept of “sleep” comes out of this night-time metaphor. Sometimes “sleep” refers to death, but here the context indicates it refers to useless or sinful activity. Jesus said He came “as a light into the world, so that everyone who believes in me should not remain in

darkness” (John 12:46). There is nothing more valuable in the darkness of night than to see a ray of light. What did Jesus tell Paul he was to be to the Gentiles in Acts 13:47?

- **The nearness of our salvation** refers to the full realization of all that is promised and hoped for. The root of the word *egguteron*, (“near, close at hand”) is used in Phil 4:5 where the exhortation is based on the fact that the Lord is “near” or “coming soon”^{NLT}. How is the new “day” for the believer to begin according to 1 Cor 15:52?

13:12-13 In these verses the idea of the Christian life is that we are in the last hours of the night, but we are people of the daytime age. Everything will change at dawn. The focus is not on our benefit at dawn, but one the end of an opportunity for us to manifest His presence in our lives to a dark night-time age. In the light of later revelations about the Second Coming of Christ, we see this as a reference to the imminent return of Christ, the end of the age of Grace and the launching of a brief period of wrath against an unbelieving world (Rev 4-19) before the new age of the millennium (the daylight). Whatever is to be done to evangelize the lost and reach the last people group must be done as quickly as possible. This is the urgency of the passage. How does the following verse compare to our passage?

1 Thes 5:6-8

- The “cast off” and “put on” are seen as metaphoric acts as of carrying around a dead man’s clothes which are to be cast off and new clothes with all their new characteristics are to be put on. Start a list of the six “cast off” traits to be done away with in Rom 13:13, then compare the six traits to be “put off“ from Col 3:8-9. How do they compare?

Rom 13:13

Col 3:8-9

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.

- Paul is only going to invest time exhorting believers to change if these were real problems. The negative aorist imperative implies an immediate “stop doing” something. Some clarification may be in order with these translations:
 - 1) “Rioting”^{KJV} or “carousing”^{NAS/NET} or “revelry”^{NKJ} or “orgies”^{NIV} or “wild parties”^{NLT} (*komos*, “a nocturnal procession of half drunken and frolicsome people who parade through streets with torches and music in honor of Bacchus or other gods or all night drinking parties and immoral behavior.
 - 2) “Drunkeness” (*methais*, “become drunk with alcoholic drinks” or drugs?)
 - 3) “Sexual immorality” or “promiscuity”^{NLT} (*koite*, “sexual relations, or sexual impurity”)

NOTES

- 4) “Sensuality”^{NET}, “chambering”^{KJV}, “debauchery”^{NIV}, “lewdness”^{NKJ} (*aselgeia*, “living without any moral restraint, lustfully indulgent, outrageous sexual behavior”).
- 5) “Discord”^{NET}, “strife”^{most}, “dissension”^{NIV}, “quarreling”^{NLT} (*eris*, “political or domestic quarrelling, wrangling” or “to meet in battle” or “rivalry.”) The word comes from the goddess Eris, the goddess who excites wars.
- 6) “Jealousy”^{NET/most}, “envying”^{KJV/NKJ} (*zelos*, “eager rivalry, zealous imitation, object of emulation or desire, bliss, honor, glory”; or “extravagance”) The term could be good (“zeal or ardor” in Rom 10:2; 2 Cor 7:11), but the command to stop doing it implies a negative meaning of desiring and striving for things that are not yours or not legitimate.

Is there any contemporary relevance to these commands in the 21st century?

13:14 Rather “put on” (*enduo*, “be clothed with”) the Lord Jesus Christ. How do you do that? Here Paul answers part of the question by giving a concise action to countermand the former list of indulgences. Eliminate the foregoing sensual responses by simply “make no **provision** for the flesh.” “Provision” (*pronoia*, “forethought, be concerned about, plan ahead”) means to fantasize about pornographic or self-indulgent acts or passions, dreaming of how to make them happen. The NLT translates this phrase, “Don’t let yourself think about ways to indulge your evil desires.”