

Moral Conduct that Flows from Understanding Our Place in the World

Romans 13

Romans 13. It is very fitting that this chapter be found in this epistle. The Roman Empire was in power, and these believers were in the very capitol where that power was concentrated. The Jews did not want to accept the idea that they were under the Gentiles dominion due to their failure, and frequently rebelled against the Romans, becoming a constant source of grief:

- Emperor Tiberius expelled Jews from Rome because they were aggressively seeking proselytes (A.D. 19)
- Emperor Claudius evicted the Jews from Italy (A.D. 51) because of some uprising. Aquila and Priscilla had to leave too, because they were Jewish by race, although from Alexandria.

There was a danger that the Jewish mindset would filter its way into the Church. To safeguard against that, the Apostle gives these exhortations concerning submission to the civil powers. In the time that we live in the governments are generally favorable toward Christians, yet these things still apply. The time may come when they are hostile toward Christians, and these principles will still apply. Another thing that the Jewish mindset would tend towards is ceremonial cleanliness. In chapter 14 Paul takes up the interaction of brethren when some have more strict convictions than others.

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Submission & Obedience: to “the Powers That Be” (13:1-7)

The Exhortation to be Subject to Authorities (v.1a)

CHAPTER 13

¶ **1a** Let every soul be subject to the authorities that are above *him*. v.1a It has been well said; “obedience and submission are the healing principles of mankind”. God has an order in everything that flows from His hand. If we want things to run smoothly we need to follow God’s order. This applies broadly to: the household, the marriage relationship, the assembly, and even our place in this world (the terms “*every soul*” and “*the authorities*” are very general). No authority is perfect, except for God; but the authority is still recognized by God. Rebellion in any context is wrong. In the verses that follow, the specific authority taken up is civil governments. Two reasons are given.

Reason #1: Governments are Instituted by God (vv.1b-2)

1b For there is no authority except from God; and those that exist are set up by God. **2** So that he that sets himself in opposition to the authority resists the ordinance of God; and they who *thus* resist shall bring sentence of guilt on themselves. vv.1b-2 The first reason given is the highest reason. Authority flows from God. We are taught today that the government gets its authority from “the consent of the governed”. This is wrong. Whether they believe it or not, all governments today get their authority from God. Government as a principle was instituted by God after the flood. Destroying man from the earth was necessary due to the violence and corruption that had filled the earth. Yet it was something God never wanted to do again; for God said “neither shall all flesh be cut off any more by the waters of a flood” (Gen 9:11). But since God was still dealing with the First Man, what would He do? He gave government to restrain evil; “whoso sheddeth man’s blood, by man shall his blood be shed, *etc.*” (Gen. 9:5-6). The point here is that government is God’s institution, and carries authority from Him. To resist the government is to resist God... a very dangerous position. Paul isn’t teaching that governments do everything right; far from it. Rather, we are to be

subject to them even if we are treated poorly (Dan. 3:16-18). The context here is the Roman government that crucified our Lord, the One who had done nothing amiss.

Reason #2: Governments Do Not Bother the Upright (vv.3-4)

3 For rulers are not a terror to a good work, but to an evil *one*. Dost thou desire then not to be afraid of the authority? practise *what is good*, and thou shalt have praise from it; **4** for it is God's minister to thee for good. But if thou practisest evil, fear; for it bears not the sword in vain; for it is God's minister, an avenger for wrath to him that does evil. vv.3-4 Now we get a lower reason, but still a good reason. Government was given to restrain evil, and it has been used by God for that purpose until the present day. All we need to do is look at countries where they don't have an organized government and we see that chaos reigns. If we do not submit to the civil governments we will feel the consequences (sentences, fines, etc.). Now, governments aren't perfect; in fact human governments never are. Paul himself would face the executioner's block before long, and yet he says that generally speaking, civil authorities only bother troublemakers and crooks. The government will even praise you for doing good, although that is not our incentive. "It is God's minister, an avenger for wrath". The civil powers are an extension of God's governmental judgment on the wicked.

Not the highest authority. If the civil authorities were to command a believer to do something that is positively evil, we must remember that "*we ought to obey God rather than men*" (Acts 5:29). In such a case, the Christian is to suffer *passively*, not resist *actively*. The Assembly also is a higher authority than the government. The Assembly's authority comes from the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ in the midst of two or three gathered to His name (Matt. 18:20). Paul grilled the Corinthians on this matter; "*Dare any of you, having a matter against another, go to law before the unjust, and not before the saints?*" (1 Cor. 6:1-2). This doesn't mean the Christians are not to cooperate with the civil powers. Clearly, this chapter teaches that we should. If a person violates the laws of the land, the assembly cannot cover it up. The assembly collectively is not subject to the civil powers (it is heavenly), but as individual Christians we are subject to them. In a case of a law breaker, individuals may be responsible to testify in court, etc. but not the assembly. But it would be wrong for a Christian to sue another Christian in civil court. There is a higher authority for matters of personal trespass. Also, the governments do not set the standard of righteousness. For that we must go to the Word of God. Abortion, gay marriage, etc. are wrong, not because of what the government says, but because of what God says.

Summary of the Reasons: For Fear and For Conscience's Sake (v.5)

5 Wherefore it is necessary to be subject, not only on account of wrath, but also on account of conscience. v.5 In summary, we are not to be subject merely because of the consequences of disobedience to the civil powers (*wrath*). There is a higher principle, and it is the fact that the powers that be are ordained of God (*conscience*).

A third reason is given in 1 Pet. 2:13-17. There Peter says that submission to *every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake* is *the will of God, that with well doing ye may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men.* That is, submission to authority is critical for the believer to be a good testimony in a dark world where unbelievers are looking for avenues to blame us.

The Subject of Taxes and Customs (vv.6-7)

6 For on this account ye pay tribute also; for they are God's officers, attending continually on this very thing. v.6 In [Matt. 17:25-27](#) the Lord explains that because we are children of the Kingdom, and all that we see around us belongs to Christ, the heir of the kingdom, that by association with Him, technically we are free and shouldn't have to pay taxes. However, as Christians we are not to insist on our rights, and *lest we should offend them* we are to pay taxes. Note: the money in the fish's mouth was for Peter and Jesus; the Lord paid taxes! Here in Romans 13 we have another reason; we are to pay taxes in the spirit of supporting God's officers. Until the administration of this world is taken over by Christ, the God-ordained governments are in power, and we should think of them as caretakers of what will shortly belong to us as co-heirs with Christ! Sometimes we observe *wryly* that governments "attend continually" on taxing their citizens!

7 Render to all their dues: to whom tribute *is due*, tribute; to whom custom, custom; to whom fear, fear; to whom honour, honour. v.7 There was nothing more galling to the Jew than to have to pay taxes to the Romans. To them this was upside down! These taxes were proof of Israel's sin. We are to "render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's" (Mark 12:17). This is not limited to taxes:

- Tribute would be like property and income taxes.
- Custom would be sales taxes and import taxes (not talking about worldly ways or national customs).

- Fear is a respect for those who occupy that place because of the authority given them of God.
- Honor is an esteem for them because of their role as God's officers. Not mocking them behind their backs. This is the attitude we are to have toward those we are subject to.

This doesn't mean that a Christian should get involved in politics or try to steer the course of the civil power. There is no thought of the union between Church and state in scripture. Such a union is an abomination to God, as seen in the woman Jezebel ([Rev. 3; 17-18](#)).

What about the case of a revolution or civil war? We are to submit to the government that exists at any given time; it says "*the powers that be*". We should not join the rebels. But once the new government is in place we are to be subject to it.

Testimony & Hope: as "Lights" in a World of "Darkness" (13:8-14)

Love to our Neighbor fulfills the Law (vv.8-10)

8a Owe no one anything, unless to love [agape] one another: v.8a The "owing" in this verse is extremely comprehensive. Whether it debts or other obligations, we are to make good on them as soon as they are due. *A Christian is to keep his word*. Some have taken this verse to mean a Christian should never take out a loan. Its fine if someone wants to apply it that way, but in the context it is outstanding debts to a neighbor (v.9) without the ability to pay. Certainly we should never take out a mortgage we cannot afford. But to have an agreement with a lender to borrow a certain amount then make payments by scheduled dates is not in conflict with this verse. Being delinquent on loan payments is another story. "*Unless to love one another*" means that the only legitimate debt that we should have outstanding is a debt of love! We will never pay off the debt of love we owe for all of God's grace. We should never get the idea that we have done enough, that the debt is paid.

8b for he that loves another has fulfilled the law. v.8b It doesn't say we fulfill the Law by putting ourselves under it, but by loving others. It also doesn't say where we get the desire to love, or the power to walk in love and thus fulfill the Law. Romans 7 makes it clear that the *desire* to love comes from the new nature, not the Law. Romans 8:3-4 makes it clear that

it is by the *power* of the Spirit of God that the believer fulfills the righteous requirement of the Law.

9 For, “Thou shalt not commit adultery” [Exo. 20:14], “Thou shalt not kill” [Exo. 20:13], “Thou shalt not steal” [Exo. 20:15], “Thou shalt not lust” [Exo. 20:17]; and if there be any other commandment, it is summed up in this word, namely, “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself” [Lev. 19:18]. **10** Love works no ill to its neighbour; love therefore *is the whole law*. vv.9-10 The commandments here quoted are from the second group. The [ten commandments](#) are divided into two parts. The first four commandments had to do with fidelity toward God, summarized by the Lord as “*Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy understanding*” (Deut. 6:5). The last six have to do with conduct toward our fellow man, and the Lord summarized them as “*Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself*” (Lev. 19:18). Read Matt. 22:36-40. Note: because man’s responsibility toward God is greater than his responsibility toward his fellow man (a principle very backwards today) the second group was called “*these least commandments*”. The apostle shows that the man-ward part of the Law is fulfilled by the command to love, without formally being under Law (see also Gal. 5:14).

Walking as Lights in a Dark World in view of the Coming Day (vv.11-14)

Spiritual slumber. These verses (vv.11-14) gives us the reason why Romans 12-16 are so important. When the Church lost the hope of Christ’s imminent return, she fell into a state of spiritual slumber. We get this in the parable of the ten virgins. The five wise virgins (true believers) slept along with the five foolish (false professors). When they were all sleeping it was impossible to distinguish the real from the false. God wants us to be living in the light of the Lord’s coming, and He wants our practical ways to conform to the interests of Christ.

¶ **11** This also, knowing the time, that it is already time that “we” should be aroused out of sleep; for now *is our salvation nearer than when we believed*. v.11 Romans 13:11 is the believer’s alarm clock. The world is asleep and their judgment is fast approaching. It is possible for the believer to sleep along with the world (Eph. 5:14). It is “already time” to be aroused out of sleep, because the Lord’s coming is always presented as an imminent hope to the Christian. [Salvation](#) is a word used in scripture in several different ways. Here, “*our salvation*” refers to the final sense of salvation (still future), when the Lord comes to rapture us home, and we are glorified (Phil. 3:20-21; 1 Thess. 4:15-18). Believers are to be characterized by “*knowing the time*”; we are living in an evil world that is fast

approaching its judgment.

12 The night is far spent, and the day is near; let us cast away therefore the works of darkness, and let us put on the armour of light. v.12 The “*night*” refers to the dark condition of the world since Christ’s rejection, while He is absent. The “*day*” refers to the time when He appears the second time for salvation, and the Sun of Righteousness arises with healing in His wings. (See John 9:4-5). The day is fast approaching, for the “*night is far spent, and the day is at hand*”. In light of the nearness of “*the day*” we are to:

- “*Cast off the works of darkness*” means that we are to sharply remove the practices of this world from our lives. The world is coming under judgment, and while we are assured the wrath of God will never touch us, we want to treat those things like flammable materials.
- “*Put on the armor of light*” means we are to walk according to the desires of the new nature, resulting in a holy life. That holiness will be “armor” to us, in that our lives will expose the true condition of the dark world around us, which will in turn have a preserving effect on our lives.

The exhortation “*let us*” indicates that these activities spring from the desires of the new nature.

13 As in the day, let us walk becomingly; not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and lasciviousness, not in strife and emulation. v.13 Now we get something deeper; “as in the day”. The “day” hasn’t arrived yet for this world (v.12), but for the believer it is no longer night in the sense of ignorance of God, but instead it is already day because we live in the prophetic light of that day (2 Peter 1:19). Christ is not yet reigning in this world, but He reigns in the hearts of believers. We are to walk “*becomingly*” of the day of Christ’s appearing! We are all “*the children of the light*” and “*of the day*” (1 Thess. 5:5). Three spheres of evil that ought never to characterize our walk:

- Not in “*rioting and drunkenness*”, which are various forms of *civil* intemperance.
- Not in “*chambering and lasciviousness*”, which are varied forms of *sexual* impurity.
- Not in “*strife and emulation*”, which are varied forms of *interpersonal* hostility.

14 But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not take forethought for the flesh to fulfil its lusts. v.14 We get the positive exhortation first: to “*put on*” or practically manifest the life of “*the Lord Jesus Christ*”. Then the negative side: do not make “*provision for the flesh*”. To fill our lives with anything else but Christ is to make provision for the flesh.