

Romans 13: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 13 August 2020

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[0 : 00] Romans chapter 13. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain, for he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer.

Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath, but also for the sake of conscience. For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing.

Pay to all what is owed to them, taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honour to whom honour is owed.

Owe no one anything except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not covet, and any other commandment are summed up in this word, you shall love your neighbour as yourself.

Love does no wrong to a neighbour, therefore love is the fulfilling of the law. Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep, for salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed.

[1 : 35] The night is far gone, the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness, and put on the armour of light. Let us walk properly, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarrelling and jealousy, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh to gratify its desires.

Romans chapter 13 is one of the more controversial passages in Paul. Paul's brief statements about our relation to the authorities within it seem to proceed from an exceedingly conservative political vision, one that has troubled many, especially those who have hoped for somewhat more support for political radicalism, from an apostle for whom Christ's universal lordship is such a prominent theme.

However, as is often the case with Paul, closer examination may reveal a more subtle picture than we initially supposed. As usual, one of the first things that we need to do is to read these verses in their context, both the wider context and the more immediate one.

The wider context of the letter speaks of the great act of God's grace in Christ, by which God's saving righteousness is realised in a manner which puts the ungodly in good standing with God, while manifesting and upholding the just order of the world.

Christ declared to be the Son of God by the resurrection from the dead, and the good news of his reign is to be spread to all nations, calling people to the obedience of faith. Clearly, in the light of such a message, governments cannot simply go on as if nothing had ever happened.

[3 : 09] Although Paul's statement at this juncture should not be expected to present a full account of the impact of Christ's lordship upon the realm of earthly government, we should read it aware that it belongs within such a larger picture.

In the more immediate context of the preceding chapter, we also have teaching about not avenging ourselves, which provides important background for the discussion of the ruler as an avenger, serving God and carrying out God's wrath.

Beyond this, Paul has also just been teaching about how we relate to those outside the faith. His emphasis upon living at harmony and at peace with others is particularly important.

Contrary to what some suppose, there is a very great deal that Christians can have in common with their non-Christian neighbours. There is no necessary conflict between Christians and their non-Christian neighbours and governments in most situations.

We should be those who prioritise and seek peaceful coexistence in our societies. As the Lord addresses the Jewish exiles in Babylon in Jeremiah chapter 29 verse 7, But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

[4 : 21] Even where harmony clearly does not exist, Paul has already taught about the importance of blessing those who persecute us. The persecutors of the early Christians were often those in government. Even in the context of the admittedly early reign of Nero, and the commonality of suffering at the hands of the authorities for Christians, Paul can speak as if the ordinary relationship between Christians and government is one of respectful and obedient submission.

And he does not seem to be excessively concerned to articulate the potential, and I believe quite real, exceptions to or qualifications of this, that we might so desire. Paul, we should remember, was a man often imprisoned, beaten, and otherwise mistreated by authorities of various types, yet who spoke of these authorities as an obedient citizen, rather than as a vengeful revolutionary.

He served a lord who had been unjustly condemned by the religious leaders of his people, and crucified by the empire of which he was a citizen. Paul had also been a participant in events such as the martyrdom of Stephen, so he was well aware of the evil that could be done in the name of authorities.

He was not someone who viewed authorities with rose-tinted spectacles, or had any illusions about their character. If we consider carefully whose words we're reading, we might realise that Romans chapter 13 verses 1 to 7 are far more radical than we might have supposed.

Some have debated whether Paul's statements were merely for Christians in that immediate time and context, telling them to submit to rulers who weren't so bad. However, there is nothing in Paul's statements here that suggests such narrow scope, nor should we believe that the rulers were really that good.

[6 : 00] Besides, a broader application to his words resonates with what we find scripture teaching elsewhere. Paul charges his readers to be subject to the governing authorities.

Government as such is ordained and intended by God, and both Christians and non-Christians alike ought to submit to it. Clearly, there are various forms that government can take, and the associated forms of subjection can vary accordingly.

What it means and looks like to be subject to a modern democratic government is rather different from what it would have meant for the Roman Christians to submit to the emperor and the various officials of the empire.

Nevertheless, Paul here teaches that we must subject ourselves to non-reciprocal human structures wherein we are commanded and have obligations laid upon us. He grounds this duty upon the fact that all authority ultimately derives from God's own authority, and that the actually existing authorities have been established by God.

We might here recall Jesus' words to Pilate in John chapter 19 verse 11. Jesus answered him, Authority may be exercised rightly or wrongly by different bearers of it.

[7 : 16] However, it is important that we honour and are subject to authorities. This is closely related to children's duty to honour their parents. Children must submit to and honour even unrighteous parents as they can, honouring them as they bear a natural authority relative to them.

This honouring is not incompatible with conscientious objections to certain immoral requirements that they might make of us. But those who start with considering such objections are seldom obeying the primary command, which is perhaps most important at the point where the authority is committed to immorality.

We might perhaps think of David's attitude to King Saul here. Even after Saul had killed the priests and pursued him without a cause in order to kill him, David still refused to strike the Lord's anointed and addressed Saul with humility and with honour.

How does God institute authorities? First, we should recognise that authority is less something that human beings construct from scratch in the world, in the great, for instance, founding events of social contracts imagined by some modern political theorists.

Rather, authority is something that emerges more organically and unpredictably in society and, as Paul believes, is raised up by God. Authority emerges in God's providence.

[8 : 33] We should begin to recognise a demythologising dimension to Paul's teaching here. In a society with an emperor cult, for instance, the statement that the authorities are providentially raised up by God and, by implication, can be brought low or removed in a similar fashion is a somewhat deflationary account compared with the grand myths of the empires and kingdoms of the day.

Authority is fundamentally a gift that God has given to humanity, and not just authority as such, but also the various actually existing authorities. A world stripped of authorities would not be a good place.

In the ordinary and divinely intended state of affairs, rulers function as a terror to evildoers, not to the righteous. There are clearly exceptions to this, as Paul well knew, even from his own personal experience.

However, he is talking about the normal situation, not the exception here. Authority was given by God in places such as Genesis chapter 9 verses 5 to 6 as a means of dealing with malefactors.

And for your lifeblood I will require a reckoning. From every beast I will require it, and from man. From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man. Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed.

[9 : 48] For God made man in his own image. A proper relationship to authority should seek the approval of those in authority over us, through righteous submission. A fundamental posture of resistance to authorities is a resistance to God's appointment.

While there may be times that we cannot submit in good conscience, out of a desire to maintain peace, we will not be seeking out such occasions. When we encounter them, we need to behave in a way that recognises and honours authority, even while we resist its unlawful impositions upon us.

Oliver O'Donovan has remarked upon the radical character of Paul's statement here, arguing that, He writes, Correspondingly, As judgment in the ancient world always has in mind a decision between two parties, as in our civil, rather than our criminal, jurisdiction, it is also to praise the party who has acted rightly.

This exactly reflects the concept of Mishpat in the Old Testament. What has now changed is the privileging of this aspect of governmental authority, so that the whole rationale of government is seen to rest on its capacity to affect the judicial task.

St. Paul's new assertion is that the performance of judgment alone justifies government, and this reflects his new Christian understanding of the political situation. Reconceiving government in terms of the execution of judgment, once again there is a humbling of it.

[11 : 32] The ruler is a servant of God, not a God himself. He has a commission and a standard by which he himself can be judged. And a master to whom he is answerable. The ruler is a steward of God's authority, not someone with independent authority of his own.

The ruler is also charged to perform as God's servant, something that we are not permitted to do as individuals, in executing vengeance on wrongdoers. Paul explicitly taught that Christians should not avenge themselves, but here teaches that the authorities can minister God's vengeance.

We might again recall Genesis chapter 9 verses 5 to 6. Beyond our need to subject ourselves to the authorities to avoid the wrath of God that the authorities minister then, we must also subject ourselves out of a conscientious recognition of them as God's servants.

When we encounter authorities, we should render them their due honour, also acting towards them in ways that will sustain their authority, through the payment of taxes and the rendering of respect and honour.

We don't get to bargain about taxes, or to decide what we think that they should be expended on. Rather, we pay authorities the tribute that we are obligated to give them. Just as we don't get to pick and choose what taxes we pay, we don't get to pick and choose what laws we obey.

[12 : 48] We respect the authorities as servants of God and ministers of the good of society. This doesn't mean that they are always good servants. However, even a bad servant is due some honour and recognition on account of his master who has commissioned him and not yet removed him from his office.

Paul now declares, Owe no one anything. Peter Lighthouse observes of this, Paul knows that everyone is needy, dependent on God and on others for almost anything.

No debts means that benefits are always finally referred to a single divine patron. In the community of Jesus, the only debt is the debt of love. Thanks is owed, but it is owed for rather than to benefactors.

Recipients of gifts are not indebted to the givers. They do not owe return payment. Givers do not impose burdens of gratitude on their beneficiaries. They cannot use their gifts to lord over recipients.

The father and his son cover all debts, supplying all needs according to their riches. Such teaching undermines the structures of patronage and clientage, which were essential to many structures of rule and social power in the ancient world.

[14 : 03] Once again, Paul is subtly, yet radically reconfiguring people's relationship with authorities. The authorities are not removed, but they are demythologized, humbled and stripped of their presumed capacity to impose obligations that once raised them up as masters, rather than as stewards and ministers of God's justice.

Lest we may have forgotten, which we definitely ought not to have done, that we are still reading the book of Romans, Paul now speaks of love as the fulfilment of the law. This is what it looks like for the righteous requirement of the law to be fulfilled in us, as we live by the Spirit.

The law is all fulfilled in the command to love your neighbour as yourself. This, we should note, is a central point in Jesus' own teaching concerning the law, in such places as the Sermon on the Mount and elsewhere.

It is also found elsewhere in the New Testament, in the teaching of James, for instance. The concluding verses of this chapter are perhaps most famous as those which occasion St. Augustine's conversion.

As in several other places in the New Testament, they present Christians as living at the time of the approaching dawn, something heralded by the advent of Christ. Christians must consequently live as people of the day, abandoning the works of darkness.

[15:17] As some commentators have observed, the behaviours he lists are those behaviours typically encountered in the night time, with drunkenness, sexual immorality and brawling. The alternative to these is to put on the armour of light and the Lord Jesus Christ, something that Paul has associated with baptism in Galatians 3, verse 27.

Baptism is like donning armour that will protect us against Satan's assaults. Whenever we are tempted by the insobriety and the iniquity of the night, we must recall that we have been marked out by God's promise as children of the light, and we must turn to him for deliverance.

A question to consider. What are some of the ways in which Paul's teaching here frees Christians in their relationship to the law, in their relationship to others, and in their relationship to the authorities?

