

Romans: Chapter Thirteen

Romans 12.1-15.13: SERVICE (Righteousness Reproduced)

The apparent abrupt change in subject to *politics* at the beginning of this chapter is all the more relevant when it is remembered that Paul has urged believers not to retaliate against those who seek their harm, but leave vengeance to God (12.17-21). Paul is showing that God has ordained government as the institution to carry out justice in this world. Furthermore, the influence of the great exhortation in 12.1-2 is not lost in this chapter. **Stott:** *Believers express their commitment to God (12.1-2) in how they relate to rulers and the law of the state.* If I am a 'living sacrifice' it will affect my conduct in the local assembly (12.3-8) and towards the saints and society at large (12.9-21). In addition, I will live as a good citizen, recognising my *duty* of submission to the government, seeking to discharge a *debt* of love to my neighbour and heeding the personal *demand* to live righteously in light of the soon return of Christ.

These injunctions were particularly relevant to believers living in Rome. Very soon the Christians would face severe persecution at the hands of Nero and, at the present time (AD57), there was growing discontent with the Roman government. Tacitus (a Roman historian) describes a revolt against paying indirect taxes in AD58. There was also the influence of the Jewish zealot movement who sought to rescue Israel from Roman rule by violence and guerrilla warfare. All of this may have raised genuine concern amongst the believers in Rome as to how their relationships with the governing authorities should be conducted.

The Duty of Loyalty to Civic Authority (13.1-7)

v.1: Paul introduces the subject with reference to 'higher powers (*exousia*)', literally 'authorities that are above' or 'over' the citizen. In this context the reference is to governmental authorities and includes any person who represents the power of the state such as local government officials, judges and police officers as well as the Prime Minister and Head of State. These authorities are 'ordained' or *appointed* (not necessarily *approved*) by God (Daniel 2.21, 4.17, 5.21; John 19.11). He is the *source* of their authority. Human government is a permanent institution provided by God for the regulation of human affairs. Its history can be traced back to Genesis 9.5-7 when divine decree gave authority to men to judge criminal matters and punish offenders. Christians should be thankful for such institutions. **Barclay:** *The state was an instrument in the hand of God preserving the world from chaos. Those who administered the state were playing their part in that great task. Whether they knew it or not, they were doing God's work, and it was the duty of all Christians to help and not to hinder.* The *pax Romana* (Roman peace) gave Christians great opportunities to spread the gospel that they otherwise may not have had.

Every person in society should therefore be 'subject' to this authority, for they represent the ultimate authority of God. 'Subject' means to habitually 'rank under', recognising a sub-ordinate place; to submit with an attitude of compliance and respect. This is demanded whatever form the government takes. Occasionally God will allow deplorable and wicked regimes (and rulers) to further His purposes or chastise a nation, all within His sovereign control (Proverbs 21.1; Revelation 13.1-7, 17.16-17). It is often noted that the word 'subject' is not strictly equivalent to obedience. A wife submits to her husband's authority, but is at liberty to disobey his demands if incompatible with God's word; He is the highest authority! Occasionally governments may decree what Christians cannot obey. **David Newell:** *If a government forbids what God commands, or commands what God forbids, then 'we must obey God rather than men' (Daniel 3.18-20; Acts 5.29).* Nevertheless, there must be submission to the judicial consequences that will inevitably follow. The state can only rightly command obedience within the limits for which it has been divinely instituted, i.e. *civic affairs* (**FF Bruce**). If the state begins to legislate in *church* affairs, then we are at liberty to resist what contradicts the word of God.

v.2: Generally speaking, however, the person who 'resists' or opposes the established authority is essentially rebelling against God. This brings 'damnation' or judgment. Though the source of such punishment is not given, it is likely from God administered through human authorities acting as His servants (cf. v.4). **v.3:** Paul thus appeals to Christians to be good citizens and live in a way so as to have no fear of punishment by the civil authorities. Their purpose is to punish those who do 'evil' and praise those who do 'good' (1 Peter 2.14) which may have reference to the Roman custom of public inscriptions commending particular good deeds of note. **v.4:** The call to submit is advanced when one considers that those in authority are in fact 'servants' (*diakonos*) of God working for the welfare of society in general. This individual may have low morals, and may not know God *personally*, but he is still God's servant *officially* and unconsciously (perhaps) is serving God's purposes in the world. He therefore has the authority to exercise justice upon the lawbreaker (evil doer). The 'sword' was a symbol of governmental authority worn by Roman magistrates. It denoted the right to inflict capital punishment on those who had committed crimes worthy of death. **v.5:** So, believers should

obey the laws of the land in order to avoid the judgment of God through human judiciaries *and* 'for conscience sake'. Believers recognise their moral responsibility and obligation to submit to the authorities as unto God.

v.6: Part of a believer's subjection to the 'higher powers' involves paying taxes (tribute). After all, those in authority are 'God's ministers' (*leitourgoi*, public servant) who give their full time to 'this very thing', i.e. serving God in their governmental function. The word 'tribute' (*phoros*) refers to *direct* taxes paid by those who were members of a nation under the rule of another. Roman citizens were exempt from direct taxation. It included a *ground* tax (e.g. 10% of all grain produced), *income* tax (1% of a man's income) and a *poll* tax (paid by everyone between 14 and 65 years of age).

v.7: Not only 'tribute' but 'custom' (*telos*) is to be paid. This was an *indirect* set of taxes including charges for buying goods (i.e. VAT), use of main roads, crossing bridges and entering markets or harbours. In all these matters, believers were morally obligated to pay their dues, which included *reverence* (fear) and *respect* (honour) towards those in authority. If the rightful King of Israel acknowledged the authority of the occupying power by paying His taxes, then so must every believer (Matthew 22.19-21).

The Debt of Love to One Another (13.8-10)

v.8: Paul takes the notion of 'debt' (v.7) to create a transition back to the topic of love (12.9-21). 'Owe no man anything' is not a prohibition against all forms of debt or borrowing (Matthew 5.42), but failing to fulfil one's obligations in terms of repayments. Believers should be responsible and prudent with their finances, taking care not to live beyond their means and undertake debt they cannot repay on time. However, '*the Christian is to be free of all debt, except the debt of love. That he can never fully pay.*' (**FB Hole**) Love is the great underlying principle of the Christian economy (John 13.34-35). *Agape* love is unconditional self-sacrifice for the blessing and benefit of others. Whilst believers are not under the Law, its moral principles originate with God and therefore do not change. True love fulfils each of these principles. **Jack Hunter:** *Paul is not wanting them to go back to the Law, but is declaring that what the Law demanded without giving strength to accomplish, true Christian liberty is able to produce.* **v.9:** Paul proves the point by stating five unchanging moral principles from the ten commandments. Each one is satisfied if we love our neighbour as much as ourselves. For example, '*Christians will not kill, for love never seeks to destroy, but always to build up. Christians will never steal, for love is always more concerned with giving than with getting.*' (**Barclay**) Note. Whilst many Jews considered one's neighbour to be merely a fellow Israelite, the parable of the Good Samaritan includes anyone who crosses our path that needs help and assistance (Luke 10.29-37). **v.10:** What was stated *positively* (v.9) is now specified *negatively*. Love will not seek to cause injury or hurt to others.

The Demand of Living in Spiritual Armour (13.11-14)

vv.11-12: 'And do this' (NIV) suggests Paul is presenting a *motive* for the practical Christian living he has demanded, not just in vv.8-10, but the entire section from 12.1. Watch vigilantly. Christians are fully aware of the significance of the present time. The 'night' of this present evil age is far advanced, the 'day' of Christ's glorious coming and reign has drawn near (*perfect* tense) with the result that it is close at hand (cf. Amos 5.18). **Now**, at this immediate moment, is our ultimate salvation (deliverance) from this wicked world and the presence of sin nearer than when we first believed. *Every day we pitch our tent a day's march nearer home.* Thus it is 'high time' to 'wake up!' **Now** is the time to stop sleeping. Too many Christians are living lethargic, lazy, apathetic, unprepared and inattentive spiritual lives. Are we so indifferent to the imminent eternal day that our lives are no different from the godless world and works of darkness around us? War valiantly. **Cottrell:** *You know it is time, to shake off your complacency and get serious about living the transformed life.* 'Let us therefore' marks the beginning of Paul's exhortations in the light of this teaching. Believers are to completely strip away, as a garment (cf. Ephesians 4.22, 25; Colossians 3.8; Hebrews 12.1; James 1.21; 1 Peter 2.1), the 'works of darkness' from which we profess to have been delivered and decisively (*aorist*) 'put on' (cf. Galatians 3.27; Ephesians 4.24, 6.11; Colossians 3.10, 12) the armour *or* weapons of light. The old dress characteristic of Adam should no longer be in evidence; the new dress characteristic of Christ ought to be clear to see! **v.13:** Walk virtuously. A believer's lifestyle and conduct should be properly suited to the day, even as if we were living in the personal reign of Christ Himself. 'Works of darkness' (v.12) are further characterised in *three* couplets which describe the main areas of strongest fleshly appeal: *self-indulgence* (late-night raucous partying and drunkenness), *sexual immorality* (promiscuity and unbridled lust) and *strife* (antagonistic competitiveness, desire for place, a hatred of being bettered) with *envy* (hateful and jealous feelings towards others). **v.14:** Wait victoriously. These were sins once common in the lives of many of Paul's pagan converts and he knew how readily the flesh would seek to drag them back to what they had left. The natural, selfish, fallen condition desires to dominate a believer. As such they must 'make no provision', literally *take no forethought* or *give no attention* to the flesh, either to arouse or fulfil its desires. The positive command is to put on the Lord Jesus Christ. In other words, meditate upon Him, that His moral character and beauty might adorn (clothe) our lives and living. He must control our motives, desires and deeds. **JB Phillips:** *Be Christ's men from head to foot.*