

Romans 13

1. Jews enjoyed a privileged status in Rome. Despite their “atheism” theirs was a regional, historical religion and so was tolerated by Rome. When Christianity was viewed as a sect of Judaism it enjoyed the same protections by the state, but because of Jewish-Christian tensions, Christians didn't remain long under the Jewish umbrella. Paul's letter was preceded by riots in Rome about *Chrestus* (reported by Seutonius) and the eviction of the Jews from Rome by Claudius, and finally their return (Bruce, 229-230).

Paul's stance here is one supported by the OT (Prov 8:15) and Jewish tradition, though there were other strands of Jews thought objecting to recognizing a heathen king (Deut 17:15) and paying taxes to a heathen state (Morris, 458). Paul had benefitted numerous times from the intervention of the state authorities (Acts 18:12+).

This isn't to say that Paul was naive. He was jailed unjustly and had himself acted as an agent of the Jewish authorities to unjustly punish Christians, just as Jesus himself was unjustly executed by the state (note Jn 19:11). There can be no doubt Paul agreed with Peter's statement to the Sanhedrin, “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29). So Paul is not teaching blind obedience, but a philosophy of approach to the secular state which considers obedience the default to be departed from only when necessary.

Given this history, how would Paul's instructions affect the dynamic between Jewish Christians and Gentiles in the Roman church? Who would find this harder to swallow?

2. Paul has made allusions to the Sermon on the Mount in Romans 12. The SOTM is famously hard to apply to civic life. Should the policeman simply ignore “do not resist an evildoer” in Mt 5:39? Some, like Luther, believed it simply didn't apply to the state. In the previous chapter Paul warned against seeking retribution, telling the Romans to “leave room for the wrath of God” (12:17-20). In this chapter Paul refers to the state as executing God's wrath on criminals (13:4). On the one hand, Jesus tells you if someone takes your coat to surrender your cloak as well; on the other hand, Paul says the courts are part of God's pattern for human living.

If a fellow believer steals from you, should you (a) prosecute; (b) take the hit as an act of love or (c) tell your pastor and elders (a la 1 Cor 6:1)? Is the answer situational though neither Paul nor Jesus weakens his statements with conditions? Is your answer different if the church is robbed rather than you? Have you ever had to make this decision?

3. All states lie somewhere on a spectrum bounded by Romans 13 and Revelation 13 (the “number of the beast” chapter). While the U. S. is not comparable to China or Russia, it does have its problems: politicians are unduly influenced by big business; abortion is the law of the land; the state has executed numerous citizens, predominantly from poor backgrounds, later found by DNA evidence to be innocent; whether deliberately or inadvertently (or both) it demonstrates a police bias against minorities; for purposes of long-term stability and economic interests it supports oppressive regimes. The list could go on.
 - a. Does any of these rise to the level of Acts 5:29, “I must obey God and not men”?
 - b. Have you ever broken the law for ethical reasons?¹ What would it take for you to do so—even at the minor level of sit-ins, refusal to disperse, boycotts of government institutions, etc.?

¹ As the Hebrew midwives did when they refused to kill their boys (Ex 1:17); as Paul did when evading custody and escaping from Damascus (Acts 9); as Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego did when they refused to worship the king (Dan 3); as Daniel did when he disobeyed Darius (Dan 6); as the apostles did when they disobeyed the Sanhedrin and continued preaching the gospel (Acts 4:18+).

4. Paul spends much of Romans telling us not only that the spirit of the law is embodied in faith (like that of Abraham; Rom 4), but that the law itself, though a reflection of God's good nature, tends to inflame our sinful desires and *encourage* disobedience (Rom 7:7-25). Paul makes it clear that only through the Spirit are we set free to follow the law, which is embodied in love.

Does it seem strange, then, that Paul tells us that God intends to keep order using a system laws and punishments? At the very least, shouldn't the Christian feel free to follow whatever the "spirit" of the legal code is, being guided by love for others rather than being bogged down by the imperfect legal code?

5. Paul lists in 11-14 antithetical pairs: night/day, sleep/wake, works of darkness/armor of light, and then contrasts "putting on Christ" (living honorably) with those things which we do to gratify the flesh when we'd be just as happy no one was watching. In referring to "putting on Christ" Paul hearkens back to Rom 12:1-2 as well as Romans 8: our very way of thinking must change with the times.

We tend to read this as advice about how to be nicer to other people, but Paul's language about the dawning day and coming salvation is much more apocalyptic. Paul is writing on the eve of the beginning of imperial persecution in Rome, and just a few years before Jewish revolt and the hammer blow against Jerusalem. Paul is telling us how to live in the last days, how to ready ourselves for the hard times to come, how to live in the light despite the dark clouds gathering. About this, Wright writes,

I know some Christians who in their private devotions each day make a conscious effort in prayer to "clothe themselves" with the very character of Jesus. Some people do this by reading, slowly, a story from the gospels, and praying that the character of the Jesus they meet there will surround them, protect them, and be the thing that other people see when they meet them. For other people it's a regular discipline of remembering their baptism, the time when they were plunged into the water as a sign of dying with the Messiah, and brought up out of it as a sign of raising again with him, so that (as in Romans 6) they are no longer living in the old world, but in the new. (90)

What practices do you find helpful in "putting on Christ"? How is this "armor" for you?²

6. Peter says that governors are sent by God to punish wrongdoers and commend those who do right (1 Pet 2:14). According to Stott, "Dr. Bruce Winter has shown that from the fifth century BC to the second century AD there was a 'long-established tradition', well evidence from both inscriptions and literary sources, 'which guaranteed that benefactors would be publicly praised' and appropriately rewarded. He also shows that Paul's very words about 'doing good' in verses 3-4 occur in inscriptions relating to a public benefaction" (345-6). How, other than through tax breaks and medals does society reward good? Ought there to be more encouragement of good behavior either in church or state?

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Fun Fact: When Michael Cassidy, founder of African Enterprise, met with South African president P. W. Botha in 1985 the president started the meeting ominously by reading to him from Romans 13.

Further Fun Fact: "The night is far gone," we read in v. 12. "Is far gone" translates *prokopto*, which means "to lengthen by hammering", as a smith forging metals (Morris, 471).

² "Armor" (NIV, NRSV) is *hopla*, offensive or defensive implements of war, elsewhere in the NT translated "weapons". (Philips: "let us arm ourselves for the fight of the day".) It's likely that it's translated "armor" because the Romans are told to put it on.

Leader's Notes:

In Romans 1-8 Paul put Jews and Gentiles on the same footing using an organic understanding of the OT in light of Jesus, culminating in the message that God's plan to make for himself a righteous people comes through the Spirit by virtue of Jesus' atoning death.

In Romans 11-13 Paul addressed the unavoidable question of why the Gentiles were joining up, but not the Jews, and what this means for God's special relationship with the Jews.

In Romans 12-15 Paul tells us what this all means for the way we live our lives. He boils it down in 12:1-2 to becoming the living sacrifices which replace the sacrifices of the law (and follow Jesus' example), motivated by God's mercy, and by means of a basic change in the nature of human thought (which we know from chapter 8 is empowered by the HS).

In 12 he looked at the gospel's implications for our relationship with God (1-2), ourselves (3-8), one another (9-16) and our enemies (17-21). In 13 he addresses our relationship with the state (1-7), the law (fulfilled by love of neighbor—8-10) and to the day of the Lord's return (11-14).

This passage is notoriously hard to swallow, largely because it challenges a lazy hermeneutic which wants to ignore context and read it in isolation. Read intelligently it has intelligent things to say.

Covered in the discussion questions: We've already seen several points of contact between Romans 12 and the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5-7). When we studied the SOTM we saw a primary question arises regarding how Jesus' radical ethic is applied to the state. Jesus commands us to give our tunic as well; does this mean we change how the state works?

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It's easy to go far afield on this topic. Here is a question or two which didn't make the cut:

1. Paul refers to the government as bearing the "sword." The word for sword, *machaira*, was used in 8:35 to refer to death and is used elsewhere to refer to execution (Acts 12:2; Rev 13:10). Is Paul normalizing capital punishment or simply reflecting his darkened times?³
2. "The one who loves has fulfilled the law" (8). What of the laws against victimless crimes?
3. Behind Romans 13 is the principle that we should always try first to work within the system. Does this apply as well to other social structures, such as workplace, church, marriage, family and schools?

³ Stott: "...I think the state should retain its right to use 'the sword', in order to bear witness both to its solemn God-given authority and to the unique sanctity of human life" (345). Is capital punishment, then, pro-life?