

“Living in the Land”

- Romans 13

by Pastor Tim Dodson
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Romans 13

1 Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. 2 Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring

judgment on themselves. 3 For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. 4 For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil. 5 Therefore you must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience' sake. 6 For because of this you also pay taxes, for they are God's ministers attending continually to this very thing. 7 Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor. 8 Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law. 9 For the commandments, "You shall not commit adultery," "You shall not murder," "You shall not steal," "You shall not bear false witness," "You shall not covet," and if there is any other commandment, are all summed up in this saying, namely, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." 10 Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law. 11 And do this, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep; for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed. 12 The night is far spent, the day is at hand. Therefore let us cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light. 13 Let us walk properly, as in the day, not in revelry and drunkenness, not in lewdness and lust, not in strife and envy. 14 But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts.

It was around A.D. 56 that the apostle Paul wrote this letter to a group of Christians living in Rome. These believers were certainly no stranger to abusive governments and tyrannical rulers. One of which was an infamous individual by the name of Nero Claudius Caesar.

Just eight years after this letter was written, a fire broke out in Rome. To deflect accusations that he had started the fire in order to make room for palace expansion, Nero blamed the Christians. Christians were horribly persecuted under his rule. History records that **“Some were condemned to be dressed in animal skins and torn apart by dogs, while others were burned to death in nighttime pyres that provided light for the emperor’s garden parties”** (history.com).

All of this makes chapter 13 all the more distasteful and for many of us precisely where our ardent allegiance to scriptural direction ceases. For this is the very government about which Paul is speaking when he says the government is, *“an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer”* (Romans 13:4). This is the governing authority to whom the Romans Christians were told to submit.

One thing for sure, to wrap our minds around this passage, Romans 13, we must understand it in the context of the whole letter to the Romans, particularly chapter 12. Too often, Christians read and attempt to interpret scriptural passages in isolation. That is a huge mistake, especially here.

We have just covered Romans 12 extensively and dealt particularly with Romans 12:9-21 in depth. Paul therein tells Christians how they are to live their lives in light of God’s mercy. The overwhelming message of Romans 12 is that Christians are supposed to be people of love, people of peace. Paul gave instruction there that if they as believers were persecuted, even if they are mistreated, even if they are cursed, Christians were to respond in love. They are told to be *“be patient in tribulation”* (vs. 12). They are told to bless their persecutors (vs. 14). They are told to, *“Repay no one evil for evil”* (vs. 17). They are told to feed and give drink to their enemies (vs. 20). And then along comes Romans chapter 13.



Paul wrote in Romans 12:19-20, Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord. Therefore "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; If he is thirsty, give him a drink..."

Christians are told vengeance belongs to the Lord and they should not take part in avenging themselves. Do we understand that this is our calling? This is undoubtedly part of how we present our bodies to God as a living sacrifice (Romans 12:1). If there was a lack of clarity in your mind as to the cost of being a follower of Christ up until this point, such should be coming into great focus right about now. I have never been one of those pastors who has painted a rosy picture of the life of a born again Christian. It is often very hard and the cost at times is beyond measure. Paul knew it too, and after presenting the salvation cost that was carried on the back of our rescuer, starkly remarked that laying our lives down at his feet...all of it, is still, despite it all, our "reasonable service." Oh yes...he knew what he was saying and the impact that it would and should have upon us. It seems that on some level, the letter to the Romans separates the sheep from the goats, the men from the boys. Being a Christian was never for the faint of heart. Being a disciple of Christ has never been for the marginal, the tacit, the dabbler in religion. This is a serious and radical faith.

As soon as Paul tells Christians not to take part in avenging themselves in chapter 12, (remember, chapter breaks were inserted later by men) he says there is "an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil." (Romans 13:4). God's avenger then must be the most unlikely bunch on earth; *the Roman governing authorities*. In spite of Rome's wickedness and evil, perhaps even despite any blistering rebuke we might lay on our own government, Paul said they actually serve a God-ordained purpose. And because they serve a God-ordained purpose, Christians should be subject to their authority (Romans 13:1). I clearly understand that those words, for many of us, are fighting words. Throw-down-step-out-into-the-street words. If it matters to you at all, I, for the sake of full disclosure, want to tell you that I not only understand your sentiment but your passion. I'm right there with you...bristling at the challenge!

All of this may have come as a shock to first-century Christians, but it was actually nothing new to those who are familiar with the Old Testament. The empires of Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, and Persia were all incredibly wicked, but they were factually used by God to carry out His divine purpose. Certainly they were not God's people. God did not command or condone their wickedness, but He allowed their wickedness to serve His purposes. Who ever said that a person needs to be Christian adherent to be used by God to see His purposes come to pass? God does whatever He wants to do and uses whoever he desires. It's all Gods. So Paul was saying that God was doing the same with the Roman Empire. Indeed, God has and yet does the same with every individual and nation of mankind.

We must remember, this passage wasn't a charter unto Caesar about how to run his government or what constituted a legitimate government. Nor is it a manifest of, or an edict to, our current government's methods, plans, or priorities. This passage was *written to Christians*, whose true citizenship was not to Rome but to heaven. It does however test every believer's position as to the sovereignty of God over any and all aspects of the natural and modern world in which we live. Is He in control or not? Is He the boss or merely a passive observer?

The application is spelled out clearly: Christians living in Rome were being told to pay their taxes and not resist the government's authority, even if they were killed for their submission. And...*here it is, so are we*. We must remember...our citizenship is heavenly, not earthly. We are still called to be peacemakers, and live out our faith in love. Not the easy sticky kind of love that the world dishes out. But the kind of love that sacrifices to the extent of the cross. We are still called to love our enemies by giving them food and drink. We are still called to overcome evil with good. We are still called to submit and pay our taxes, even if doing so kills us.

The question then on the hearts and lips of everyone now is: *How far reaching is this directive? Is there never a time that the people are to rise up against their oppressors?* Our calling, like the calling of our first-century brethren, is to take up our cross and follow, and leave vengeance to God. Are we ready to be martyrs if necessary? Do we trust God then that our deaths will be avenged appropriately?

Undoubtedly this is one of those passages that the modern church "loves to hate." Today the modern church lives in an age of extreme political activity and social tailoring. The term is "dominion theology." Such is exercised by attempting to overcome the evils of this age...or at least the *perceived* evils of this age, and to replace such with a "Christian" nation and form of government. Essentially, such seeks to remove the freedom to sin from a world wherein that God clearly allowed such. It is not a "come out from amongst them and be separate" but rather "go in amongst them and make them

do what you want them to do.” I realize that to take this position will potentially make me vilified by some church goers around this nation that have stumbled onto the sound of my voice today. But then, that has never stopped me before, why start now? Many individuals will flat out reject or ignore this scriptural directive, and will bristle at its mandate as well as the other Scriptures that tell us virtually the same thing:

Titus 3:1 “*Remind your people to submit to the government and its officers. They should be obedient, always ready to do what is good.*”

1Peter 2:13-14 “*For the Lord’s sake, accept all authority—the king as head of state, and the officials he has appointed. For the king has sent them to punish all who do wrong and to honor those who do right.*”

Daniel 2:21 “*He (God) determines the course of world events; he removes kings and sets others on the throne. He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to the scholars.*”

Those who struggle on this issue can and do attempt to justify their position with multiple arguments. But none can negate the written Scripture and such personal standings are ultimately based out of pride, rebellion, and a lack of understanding of God’s sovereign control. No one sits in a position and/or power that God does not allow. That doesn’t mean we will always understand why, nor does it mean we support such by ‘jumping on their bandwagon.’ Such extreme faith will be asked of us in other scenarios in our walk anyway, so we best get used to it!

Part of the problem lies in the fact that we are confused as to the realm of rule that government exercises over our lives. The government has authority only within the civil realm. For example, when Paul commands wives to obey their husbands, they are required to obey them as husbands, not as masters or as kings. Children are to obey their parents as parents, not as kings. This is the same when it comes to our government leaders. There are three institutions ordained by God: the family, the church, and the government. All three exist because God set them up. This does not in any way mean that those who are heads of these “institutions” are Godly. Sometimes they are, but sometimes they’re not. But the passage is not directed to them, it is directed to us!

Scripture tells us that the “heart of man is desperately wicked,” (Jer 17:9) and that essentially without Christ, man is dead! (Col 2:13; “*You were dead because of your sins and because your sinful nature was not yet cut away.*”) We can prop him up, change his appearance, constrain him, and like a puppet make him say the things we want him to say, but it doesn’t make him born again. It doesn’t make him a Christian because he looks like one or even acts like one!

Again, *are there limits to this directive?* Well, as in all scriptural messages, we must interpret them in light of the Bible as a whole. From such a process we gather that the only time believers are allowed to stand against government is when they attempt to stop us from personally worshipping and following Jesus Christ. When they cross the civil line into our personal and corporate worship, we must stand with God and the directives that he gave *us*. But such is not the situation here in America at this time. I’m not saying that they aren’t *squeezing* us, but they are not *stopping* us. **That** would be a fatal mistake.

Teaching that we are to obey our civil authorities is undeniable. Not only are we told such, we are given an overt example by those we find within the pages of Scripture. Paul teaches such obedience and lived such obedience. Titus 3:1 “*Remind your people to submit to the government and its officers. They should be obedient, always ready to do what is good.*” And we are reminded to diligently pray for our leaders in 1 Timothy 2:1-2. Paul himself personally suffered under civil law at the hands of Nero and others, though he never raised an militia or organized a voter registration table in the lobby of the churches where he preached. Neither did our Savior at the hands of Pilate. What he told Pilate was “...*you would have no power over me at all unless it were given to you from above.*” (Jn 19:11). Jesus understood that GOD was in control in all circumstances! **Do we?**

But in the realm of personal spiritual liberty, the saints stood strong against the powers that be. In Acts 4 and in Acts 5:29, Peter and John stood against the ruling council over just such issues. Paul said in Galatians 1:10, “*For do I now persuade men, or God? Or do I seek to please men? For if I still pleased men, I would not be a bondservant of Christ.*” Peter and

John in Acts 4:18-19 were commanded to never again speak or teach in the name of Jesus, and they replied, *“Do you think God wants us to obey you rather than him? Of course, we know the rest of the story!”*

Paul had taught some heavy doctrinal issues for over 10 chapters, but as he most often did, he followed up on such theological lessons with its practical applications. For Paul, it only counted if such doctrine was actually put into practice. In truth, this is the way of Scripture. John declares in his gospel that *“If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them...”* (John 13:17)

We cannot miss the other glaring issue here, despite any chance that such can no doubt be seen as self-serving. Paul declares that any such authority be respected, and that would also encompass the authority of the pastor. If one refuses such civil authority, he still has the option to move to another country, just as one has the option to go to another church. But just as we are not to attempt to circumvent the authority of our civil government, we are not to do so against our church government either. God has placed the pastor (and in our case our church board) as authority within the church, to deal with issues of spiritual nature as they pertain to the body of Christ within that fellowship. The pastor is not a king, he is not the ruler over anyone’s personal life, but he has the mandate from God to keep the church in purity and centered on the pursuits of the kingdom. This is not an option for him, nor is it an option for anyone in terms of honor in the realm of the church toward their pastor. Respect is optional and hopefully earned... but honor therein is mandated.

Paul understood well that the one to fear government is the individual that breaks the law and rebels against its authority. If we pay our taxes, obey the laws of the land, and keep our eyes on God and His Kingdom, we have nothing to fear. For government was established not as a tool of spirituality or even morality, it is a tool of order. If you live “in order,” then you have nothing to fear. *“Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same.”* No government praise these days for the Christian world? Maybe it’s because we aren’t doing “what is good.”

In light of all that has been said then, pay your taxes! Jesus paid His dues (Matt 17), we can pay ours. Again, whether we agree or not, (and He’s not asking), they are God’s “ministers.” Paul goes further in telling us to render to whomever, whatever is due! That can mean taxes, honor, respect, etc! The only thing that keeps us from such is pride and rebellion.

13:8 – *“Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law.”*

There are those who want to believe that this verse prohibits borrowing money. And while such is always something to take seriously, to be practiced cautiously, and to be dealt with in honor and diligence, such an understanding is not within the scope of the context or the rest of Scripture.

The meaning is, if we do then **pay what we owe**, whether that means taxes, your bills, credit card payments, honor and most of all love. And according to Scripture, we owe everyone that last one. It is a debt that is frankly never paid in full. We are to honor our obligations to the state, to the Lord, and to each other.

13:9-10 – *“For the commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery,’ ‘You shall not murder,’ ‘You shall not steal,’ ‘You shall not bear false witness,’ ‘You shall not covet,’ and if there is any other commandment, are all summed up in this saying, namely, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.*

Despite the common interpretation, verse 9 does not tell us to love ourselves. For such does not need any encouragement or direction! Verse 9 is a recognition that we already do love ourselves! It is a demand to love each other with that same truth and reality. And by the way, if we love others we will have no trouble being in submission, for love is embedded with humility.

13:11-12 – *“And do this, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep; for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed. The night is far spent, the day is at hand. Therefore let us cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light.”*

Paul capitalizes on the moment and takes the discussion to the “top of the mountain.” After all, his topics here are no doubt without great motivation. Something has given him a “fire in his belly,” and he speaks with earnest passion, a message that seems to never be more real than it is today!

Those on the receiving end of this letter apparently have been “asleep at the spiritual wheel.” Paul says it’s time to “wake up.” Their salvation, *meaning the imminent return of Christ*, was very near. And today it is much much closer! Whether He comes to get us, or whether we go to Him, that day is coming fast. Will He find us vigilant?

13:13-14 - *“Let us walk properly, as in the day, not in revelry and drunkenness, not in lewdness and lust, not in strife and envy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts.”*

Paul ends this chapter with an interesting call upon the believer. He puts revelry (lust) and drunkenness on the same level as strife and envy. Paul makes it very difficult for any of us to get away unscathed. How many of us would have no issue with the concept and danger that lust and drunkenness is wrong, but how many of us engage in sins that is placed on equal footing: *strife and envy*.

Believer, we cannot say we have received the light but fail to walk in it. To do so is a lie, proven in practice as well as overtly supported in Scripture. Paul has taught on numerous occasions the idea of “putting on” Christ as we would new clothes. The thrust of such an idea, is that to walk in Christ in the practical realm is a conscious decision. The popular practice is to blame “supernatural” forces for our failure to walk in holiness. And while there is indeed warfare in the spiritual realm, ultimately this is a simple concept: We decide whether we are going to walk in Christ and not give ourselves opportunity for the manifest of the flesh.