

The Book of Romans Study Guide

Chapter 13

For the context regarding this chapter, see the handout: “*The Background to Paul’s Teaching on Authority.*”

13:1-2

v 1 This verse is resolutely unambiguous in its language. “Every person” leaves no room for an exemption. And the phrase “there is no authority except from God” means that all governing power exists only because God has permitted and established it.

While there are some people who will always resist authority of any kind, for most of us, we can readily agree with those words whenever people in leadership positions exercise authority in a reasonable manner. But what about when they do so harshly or in a corrupt way, just like the Romans? Can we agree with Paul that such a ruler is still established by God and worthy of our subjection?

Looking at the original language, the Greek word translated as “established” is *tassō*. It literally has the sense of being “arranged in an orderly manner.” For that reason, it is a term that was often used in a military context, with various divisions of troops led by officers under one commander. It conveys the same sense of order and delegation that Moses implemented in Exodus 18 after his father-in-law Jethro’s recommendation.

Paul is showing that Adonai is a “God of order” who has structured human society with designated roles. Thus, governing authorities are not random occurrences but are part of a divinely arranged framework to prevent chaos. Moreover, *tassō* refers to the arrangement of the office rather than a personal endorsement of the individual holding it. In other words, God ordains the structure of authority to serve the general well-being, even if the specific person in power is flawed or ungodly. This allows for a “heart attitude of submission” to the institution of government without requiring blind obedience to immoral commands.

But it is essential to recognize that this delegation begins with God. For that reason, Yeshua who is God in the flesh, made that point to Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, at his trial, saying to him: “You would have no authority over Me, unless it had been given you from above” (John 19:11).

Because all authority originates from God, but the administration was given to humanity, we can see that God allows nations to select their rulers, but the very authority they exercise originates from God. Or to put it another way, when the will of the nation is known, God accepts it and grants leaders the authority to act and to lead. So, by using this word, *tassō*, with God as the active agent, it does not matter what governing entity is involved, including the oppressive rule of Rome. Once a nation has a particular set of rulers in place over them, God establishes their authority.

And, as this verse demonstrates, “every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. The word translated as “subjection” or “submission” is *hupotassō*. It literally means “under the arrangement.” Subjection or submission is portrayed as recognizing one’s place within a structured arrangement. It is the same word Paul uses in Ephesians 5:22 and Colossians

3:18 in regard to wives submitting to husbands. So, this word is not about being “obedient” (which would be *hypakouō*), but rather a recognition of social order established by God.

- v 2 Paul describes the consequences of failing to submit to authority. Here he uses *antitasso*, translated as “resists,” but literally refers to “anti-order.” It serves as a strong rebuke against “anarchist tendencies” that seek to dismantle the very concept of social order that God has established. But this message is not limited to groups like Antifa. He applies this warning to whoever resists authority, without exceptions.

Unfortunately, sometimes people choose poorly. Israel wanted kings, but most of them ended up being evil rulers. I suppose there is an inherent warning in this story – be careful what you wish for. In other cases, governments are formed by seizing power without the participation of the general population.

Many passages in Scripture show that God judges the evil carried out by rulers. But what about the response of believers when our leaders act in what we understand to be evil or improper ways? That applies to the highest office in the land, all the way down to local authorities and those who enforce the laws. What should we do when they act improperly? Sometimes the act is so egregious that the government itself is capable of addressing it judiciously. But at other times, it is a call for God’s people to stand up and be heard. That includes God’s calling for us to live righteously, to uphold justice, to worship Him in biblically consistent ways, and to be witnesses to the world around us.

Scripture very clearly demonstrates that we have to answer to a higher authority at all times. So when earthly rulers forbid believers from doing those things, or when they compel their citizens to act in ways that violate that higher authority, Paul is showing that we have a responsibility to remain faithful to God’s calling, even if it means paying earthly consequences for doing so. That is what it means to submit to authority without obeying.

For that reason, in Acts 4:19-20, when Peter and John were commanded to stop speaking publicly about Yeshua, they responded by saying: “Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; for we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen and heard.” Paul followed the same approach when facing opposition during his journeys.

You see, they still respected the rulers in Jerusalem and in Roman cities because they didn’t rebel by resorting to violence or trying to overthrow their authority. Instead, they spoke out, and they defended the truth that they had come to know, while at the same time, they were being willing to accept the consequences that came their way for taking such a stand. And all along, they remained faithful to the higher authority of the One who created authority in the very beginning.

13:3-7

- v 3 Paul describes the ideal function of government rather than making a universal claim that all rulers are always fair. Paul is defining what a ruler should be: a protector of social order. By framing it this way, he is telling the believers in Rome that as long as they aren’t engaging in the violent, illegal activities of the Zealots, they should—theoretically—not be the target of Roman “terror.”

Unfortunately, under Nero, the Romans would soon start persecuting believers, thus confirming

that we do not live in an ideal world, and that life is not fair, even for the righteous of this world. But that does not negate our responsibility to practice righteousness, including respecting authority,

- v 4 Paul describes rulers as God’s minister, which means having a role in the administration of God’s plan. He also calls them an avenger, which describes the role of government holding man’s sinful tendencies in check, including the administration of capital punishment, described here with the symbol of the sword.
- v 5 Paul shows that we must be subject to government; not just because we fear punishment, but because, as we know it is right before God to do so.
- v 6-7 He goes on to describe our specific obligations, beginning with paying our taxes. He uses two specific Greek terms that directly addressed the abuses fueling civil unrest in those days:
 - *Phoros* (Tribute): The direct land and poll taxes levied on conquered subjects. For the Zealots, this was a symbol of slavery to a foreign master.
 - *Telos* (lit. “goal,” but translated here as “custom”): Indirect taxes on goods and trade, collected by contractors who were considered to be traitors by the public.

In spite of their oppressive nature, Paul calls upon believers to pay them anyway. So, for believers in Rome, paying taxes was not just a legal requirement, but a way to maintain a public witness that they were not part of the violent, tax-resisting revolutionary movements currently destabilizing the empire.

His choice of words in verse 7 – “render to all what is due them” is reminiscent of Yeshua’s declaration in Matthew 22:21 – “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s; and to God the things that are God’s.” Yeshua was confronted with the same issue of having to decide between Roman collaboration or Zealot revolution. His answer showed that if the coin bears Caesar’s image, he has a claim to it. However, if humans bear God’s image (Genesis 1:27), then their entire lives and loyalty belong to God.

Yeshua used the word *apodote* (render/pay back), which implies paying a debt or returning what is already owed. Paul uses the exact same verb in Romans 13:7. So, both of them frame tax-paying not as an act of worship or total allegiance, but as a transactional debt for the services the state provides. By telling followers to pay the tax, both Yeshua and Paul proved that one could be a faithful subject of God’s Kingdom without having to be a political insurgent against the Roman Empire.

In the remainder of this chapter, Paul transitions from discussing duties toward the state to the ongoing moral obligations of a follower of Yeshua.

13:8-14

- v 8-10 Paul describes love as the only debt that can never be fully repaid. He argues that every commandment is essentially a specific application of God’s instruction to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18). Those words, then, serve as the ultimate fulfillment of God’s law.

- v 11-12 Paul urges believers to “wake up” from spiritual indifference because the time of their final salvation is closer than when they first believed. He uses the metaphor of sunrise to signify that the “night” of this current age is nearly over and the “day” of Messiah’s return is near.
- v 13-14 The passage concludes with a call to practical, moral transformation. He lists specific behaviors to avoid, and then, instead of satisfying sinful desires, believers are instructed to “clothe themselves with the Lord Messiah Yeshua,” by adopting His character and making no provision for the cravings of their old nature.

There is one more relevant thought that is found in 1 Timothy 2:1-4, where Paul writes:

“I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men, for kings and all who are in authority, so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity. This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.”

So, instead of engaging in rebellion and violence against authority, we are called to pray for those who rule over us and to be thankful for them. And, as he shows, ultimately that means our respect for authority is evangelistic in nature because it creates a conducive environment for people to respond to God’s message of truth.