

BaptistWay Press® Adult Online Bible Commentary

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Studies in Romans: A Gospel-Centered Worldview

Lesson Twelve

Civic Responsibility and Neighborly Love

Focal Text

Romans 13

Background

Romans 13

Main Idea

Gospel-centered living includes submitting to governmental authorities and loving our neighbors.

Question to Explore

What are my responsibilities to the government and to my neighbors?

Quick Read

Gospel-centered living requires me to submit to my government, love my neighbors, and be ready for Jesus' return.

Introduction

It fits in that category as one of the most embarrassing moments of my life. I convene a men's Bible study every Tuesday morning from 6:30-7:15 a.m. Several of us then head to a local restaurant for breakfast. That particular Tuesday went as planned until I headed from breakfast back to the office.

Summer school was in session, but the school speed zone signs had not been properly changed to reflect summer school hours. So, I drove what I assumed was the speed limit—35 mph. When the police cruiser came up from behind with lights flashing and siren at full blast, I wondered what I had done wrong. The officer was polite but all

business. He said, “Sir, do you realize summer school is in session and the 20 mph speed limit is in effect?” My response was a blank stare. He asked for my license and proof of insurance. Before he retreated back to his car to write up my citation, he asked for my phone number and my place of employment.

I recited my phone number and then with a much softer voice said, “I work at First Baptist Church here in Lewisville.” The officer replied, “And what do you do at First Baptist Church?” “I am the pastor,” I said so softly, I had to repeat it. I wondered what my occupation had to do with anything.

The officer went back to his cruiser, and then came back just a few minutes later. No doubt, he had verified I was not a felon nor had any outstanding warrants for my arrest. I sat ready to take the citation and get away as quickly as possible. But he did not hand me a ticket. Instead he held my license and insurance card in his hand and asked me a question: “Pastor, what does Romans 13 say?”

I felt the blood rise up in my face. Romans 13? What does it say? Am I supposed to have the basic theme of every chapter of the Bible committed to memory? Is he trying to embarrass me? I know I showed the signs of a full-blown panic attack.

Then it came to me. It was crystal clear. I said, “Sir, Romans 13 tells me I am to obey the law.” The officer smiled, handed me my license and insurance card and said, “Pastor, you are right. Now have a nice day and remember what Romans 13 says.”

I will always believe divine intervention caused me to recall the contents of Romans 13. If asked to recall Psalm 23 or 1 Corinthians 13, I am good to go. But Romans 13? Yet, this chapter is critical to our understanding of God’s will and plan for our lives.

Commentary

Our outline of Romans.¹

Salutation (1:1-17)

Paul, a Servant of Jesus Christ (1:1-7)

Thanksgiving and Prayer Request (1:8-15)

Theme: the Righteousness of God (1:16-17)

The Sinfulness of Men (1:18-3:20)

Pagan Lostness (1:18-32)

Jewish Lostness (2:1-3:20)

The Grace of God (3:21-8:39)

The Heart of the Gospel (3:21-4:25)

Made Right with God (5:1-6:23)

Living in the Spirit (7:1-8:39)

The Destiny of Israel (9:1-11:36)

Paul's Lament (9:1-5)

God's Sovereignty (9:6-29)

Israel's Responsibility (9:30-10:21)

Israel's Hope (11:1-36)

The Pattern of Discipleship (12:1-15:13)

Call to Commitment (12:1-2)

Charismatic Gifts (12:3-8)

Personal Relationships (12:9-21)

Christian Citizenship (13:1-7)

Primacy of Love (13:8-10)

End of the Age (13:11-14)

The focus of this week's lesson is Romans 13:1-14.

Christian Citizenship: Some Historical Factors

This passage has been abused by many, twisting it to bolster a particular view or political platform. Keep the following factors in mind.

Roman emperor Claudius banished Jews from Rome in AD 49. This harsh action may have been the result of those claiming Jesus as the Messiah.

Roman emperor Nero, in AD 54, allowed Jews to return to the imperial city. Paul did not want the Jews to bring more trouble upon themselves, so he reminded them of the need to obey Roman authorities. Antagonistic relations with the governing authorities would affect the spread of the gospel.

Back in the land of Judea, relations between Jews and their Roman rulers were growing steadily worse. The Jewish revolt (AD 66-73) resulted in the destruction of Jerusalem.

Interpret Paul's advice in these verses in light of his belief the return of Christ was imminent. He discussed this belief in 13:11-14.

Christian Citizenship (13:1-7)

13:1-2. Paul did not suggest or ask. He commanded all believers to obey the governing authorities.

Illustration: The question of civil obedience or civil disobedience is one of the most

*difficult of our time. Ultimate authority cannot be ignored in this discussion. Bishop James A. Pike, tried for heresy by the Episcopal Church, said it well: "He has no authority who does not himself stand under authority."*²

Paul gave two reasons for obedience: First, God appointed these ruling authorities. Second, with God's approval and blessing, these ruling authorities will punish those who disobey. One biblical interpreter put it this way: "Allegiance to God does not negate responsibility to secular authority."³

13:3-5. Paul did not demand obedience for the sake of obedience alone. He reminded his readers of the reason authorities existed. Rulers rewarded good behavior and punished those who did wrong. Rulers maintained order in a society where order was necessary. Fear of punishment was not the only reason Paul's readers were to obey. The demand of a good conscience required them to submit to the ruling authorities.

13:6-7. Paul did not speak in generalities here. He applied his command to submit with a concrete and universal example—pay your taxes. In addition to paying revenues and taxes, believers owe leaders respect and honor. The words of 13:7 echo the words of Jesus: "...render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's; and to God the things that are God's" (Matthew 22:21).

Primacy of Love (13:8-10)

Paul picked up the theme of love found in Romans 12:9-21. The abrupt change in 13:1-7 has prompted some interpreters to suggest that this passage on citizenship was not part of Paul's original letter.

No textual evidence suggests Romans ever existed without this paragraph. We must deal with the issues Paul raised in these verses, however uncomfortable they may make us feel.

The first phrase of 13:8 builds upon the command to pay your financial debts and taxes: "Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another." This supreme debt of love will never be fully repaid by any one of us. Love is the ultimate fulfillment of the Law itself.

When we love, we fulfill the intent of the Law. Note the influence love brings to the commandments given during the time of the Exodus. When we love, we will respect the marriage vows. When we love, we will not commit murder. When we love others, we would never consider stealing what does not belong to us. When we love, we will be happy for those who have abundant resources. This command to love is nothing less than living out the same commitment that Jesus extended to each of us.

End of the Age (13:11-14)

Paul reasoned the return of Jesus was just around the corner. Consequently, there was no time to waste. He carried out this theme in 1 Thessalonians 5 and other New Testament

writers shared this same urgency (James 5:8-9; 2 Peter 3:11-14). These times demanded right living.

Illustration: Earl Abel's is a popular Tex-Mex restaurant in San Antonio. In addition to tasty food, the restaurant is known for its catchy signs scattered on the walls of the dining room.

"Eating at home keeps you able; eating here keeps Earl Abel."

"It was a brave man who ate the first oyster."

The sign by the big wall clock says, "This clock will never be stolen; the employees are always watching it."

Paul urged his readers to be aware of the time but for a different reason. He knew that believers did not have an unlimited amount of time to do God's work. The Christian must serve with his eye on the clock of life, mindful that one day God will announce, "It's quitting time."⁴

Paul used the concept of time, light, and darkness to illustrate his point. He urged his readers to live right knowing that the hour was late. He commanded them to wake up from inattention and laziness and to do the deeds that would bring people to God. These good deeds are those we practice during the daylight hours in contrast to the deeds done in darkness. The apostle got quite specific in his application. What do people do when the sun goes down? They feel very free to carouse and to get drunk. Under the cover of darkness, they are much more apt to engage in improper sexual relations. We are prone to escalate strife and jealousy at night when we would never do such things in broad daylight.

Paul listed six works of darkness—carousing, drunkenness, sexual immorality, sensuality, strife, and jealousy as representative of the present age of darkness. He goes beyond sinful behaviors that occur mainly after dark. Strife and jealousy can emerge at any time. Believers are to cut all these behaviors out of their lives. There is no more room for strife and jealousy than drunkenness and immorality, though many in today's churches don't seem to equate all of these as evil.

Illustration: The cattle tick is a tiny bloodsucking insect that has an amazing life history. The female cow tick has no eyes. Her skin, which is photosensitive, directs her to the tip of a twig on a bush. Here she waits to fulfill her reason to live.

In a zoo setting, these little creatures have been observed to stay on the end of twigs for as many as eighteen years! Eighteen years of waiting for just the right moment. Eighteen years of doing nothing but waiting. When the tick gets the scent of a warm-blooded animal or human, then her reason for living has come. She leaps on the animal and does

what she was created to do.

In a sense, Paul asks the Romans if they are ready to get off their twig and do what they were meant to do? The apostle highlighted the importance of the times when he said, “Awaken from your sleep, the night is almost gone, the day is near.”⁵

How are we to accomplish this command to live godly lives and to prepare for the return of Christ? Paul did not leave us to our own devices. We are to “put on the Lord Jesus Christ” (13:14). He continued his analogy of light and darkness by alluding to the proper clothing one should wear. The proper attire for nighttime sleep is pajamas and gowns. The proper attire for the waking hours is slacks, dresses, etc. You don’t retire for the night in your suit and wing tip shoes. You don’t put your head on the pillow wearing your formal evening dress. You wear these clothes during the day. Paul commanded believers to put on the clothing of armor and light (13:12).

Conclusion

Paul covered much ground in just a few words (365 words in the NASB). Naturally, there are many questions surrounding these commands to submit to pagan rulers. Also, there are questions surrounding Paul’s discussion and advice concerning debt. Consider the following questions regarding how we apply these verses to our current day.

Is civil disobedience ever a correct response? Yes. The Bible records times when faithful folks stood up to civil authorities. Peter and John stood up against the Jewish leaders and the captain of the temple guard (Acts 4). There could be times when civil disobedience is warranted because our ultimate allegiance must be to God. If and when we take such a stand, we should be ready to accept the consequences of our disobedience (Acts 4:19, 5:18-19; 1 Peter 2:13-14, 4:15-16).

Can I ever refuse to pay taxes based on what the Bible teaches? No. Every day you hear about someone who refuses to pay taxes. They assert that certain taxes and fees are unconstitutional. They harken back to the “tea party” event that precipitated the Revolutionary War. But I have never heard the argument that we should refuse to pay taxes based upon the Bible. People may mention the Bible in their arguments and invoke God’s name in their refusal to pay their share, but they never quote the Bible because there is no scriptural basis for refusing to render to the government what belongs to the government.

On the contrary, Jesus commanded us to give to the government what the government has levied (Matt. 22:21). Paul gave the same command in this chapter of Romans. You can rant and rave until you are exhausted, but you will not find any scriptural basis for such rebellion and disobedience. The Bible is clear. Christians, as good citizens, have taxpaying obligations. Whether others consider it differently, the biblical claim stands.

Is it okay to carry debt? Yes, but within reason. This is my personal opinion. Others disagree with this perspective and I respect those who take issue with me on this subject.

Americans love debt. Some would say we have built our country upon it. I have taken on debt to provide a home for a large family, to provide an education for my five children (now you see what I mean by large family), and to keep us driving reliable cars. The churches I have served have all taken on debt to build facilities so ministries could be carried out.

So in today's world, what does Paul's statement mean to "owe nothing to anyone" (13:8)? Some think this passage prohibits borrowing at all. If a church desires new facilities, they should raise the money, all of it, then proceed. If I want a new car, I should save up, then buy outright. Interestingly, an exception is made by some interpreters, allowing me to carry a mortgage.

I interpret Paul's command to say, "Pay back what you owe." If you take on debt, don't walk away from it. Fulfill your obligation. Meet the terms of the contract. Churches and individuals need to be cautious borrowers and planners, not taking on more debt than they can handle.

The church I currently serve is debt free. We did the old-fashioned note burning a few months back on a Sunday morning and celebrated this milestone. We carried debt for over twenty years. It was our means of meeting the needs of our congregation, providing facilities we sorely needed. We never carried more debt than our finance committee felt was reasonable. They kept us within a certain percentage of our overall budget. Many of us joked over the years that we did not carry out a "Together We Build" fund raising campaign, but we were continually in a "Forever We Build" mode.

Debt can wreck lives and marriages. Many suffer because of unexpected circumstances beyond their control. Others suffer because of poor financial choices made in an attempt to be happy. Paul's words call for thoughtful, prayerful actions when it comes to money.

How many times do we make significant changes *after* we experience trouble and heartache? You try to land the big fish, only to lose it when you try to catch it by the gills. From then on, you will have a landing net. We wonder about our child's friend after they get into trouble. We get all worked up about an issue after the vote. We wonder if an action was proper after we have carried it out. The relevant proverb is, "Shutting the barn door after the horse has gotten out." Commit to taking on debt only after you have done all your homework. This doesn't guarantee that unexpected events and situations will not come up, but it does give you the best chance to meet your obligations.

What's love got to do with it? Paul used darkness and light to describe the times we live in. Darkness symbolizes evil deeds, while light symbolizes good deeds. He told us to "put on" Christ. We are to live out (on the outside) what has already taken place within our

minds and hearts. Our motivation to live authentic lives is the belief that we are living in the last days. Every generation should live as though it is backed up to the threshold of eternity—the return of Jesus.

In light of this, how should we then live? Move from “Can I?” to “Should I?” If we fulfill the law of love (Rom. 13:8-10), we will live lives that draw people to Jesus, not cause confusion or send mixed messages. This means our conduct should be governed by wisdom and common sense. Instead of saying, “Can I do this?” rephrase the question and say, “Should I do this?” In other words, I may have the freedom to do certain things, but will these freedoms glorify God and bring people to Christ?

It all comes down to the question the officer asked me. What does Romans 13 say? Because I am a child of God, I am to obey the God who loves me and knows what is best for me. Obedience may not get you out of a citation, but it’s still the right thing to do.

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¹J. W. MacGorman, “Romans” *The Layman’s Bible Book Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1980), 9-10.

²James E. Hightower, Jr, Compiler, *Illustrating Paul’s Letter to the Romans* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1984), 96.

³Robert H. Mounce, *The New American Commentary (NIV) – Romans*, vol. 27 (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 1995), 243.

⁴Hightower, 102.

⁵Ibid., 99-100.