



Finer Grounds Bible Study

Romans

Lesson 20: Romans 13:1-14

As we approach this section in particular it is important to remember the historical context of Paul's letter to the Roman Christians. In A.D. 19 Tiberius had expelled the Jews from Rome, with Claudius banishing them again in A.D. 49 (Pollard 463). They were only allowed to return after Claudius died in A.D. 54 just a few short years before Paul's letter in approximately 57 A.D. Additionally, according to Tacitus during this period of time there was great civil unrest in Rome due to an increase in taxes (Pollard 464).

To add even more instability to this situation, at this point in time Rome was under the rule of the Emperor Nero, who particularly late in his reign was known for his extreme persecution of the Christians, and ultimately is historically held responsible for the burning of Rome and in turn placing the blame for this tragedy on the Christian population. A final powder keg to this explosive situation was the rebellion brewing among the Jewish Zealots that would reach its peak around A.D. 66 (Pollard 464), particularly when we keep in mind that at this point in time there was not much differentiation between Jews and Christians from the Roman perspective.

With all of this in mind it is important to remember that Paul did not write these things because the Roman government was so godly. He did not write these things because he wanted the Roman Christians to trust the government to keep them safe and provide for them (isn't that what God has promised to do?) But rather Paul is emphasizing that God rules over the kingdoms of man (Daniel 5:21) and that ultimately, respecting over governing authorities is a way in which we respect the sovereignty of God.

Before you begin Read Romans 13:1-4 and mark any key words or phrases in the text.

Read Romans 13:1

Right off the bat Paul states his point: we are to be subject (obedient, in submission to) our governing authorities. Why? Because their authority comes from God. Time and again God has used evil governments to do His will (remember Pharaoh in 9:17). Is it easier for us to be subject to governments based on a Christian worldview? Absolutely, but Jesus specifically tells us that our obedience will *not* always be easy (Matthew 5:11). As difficult as it might be, Jesus' command in Matthew 22:21 and Paul's command here are not based on the morality of the government reigning over us.

Read Romans 13:2

Here Paul follows up with the consequences of resisting our authorities: we will be judged for resisting God's authority. This is so difficult to read in our current political climate, because truly our Christian liberties are coming under attack. So how do we balance what Paul is teaching here with living as God expects us to in an increasingly hostile environment? Please note that what I am about to say is purely my opinion, however it is an opinion born of much prayer and study. I believe that God expects us to obey our authorities to the greatest extent we are able *without* compromising our faith. When there is a line in the sand and we must choose what God expects or what our government demands, we *must* do as God expects us to. That being said, the painful part is that we must also accept the consequences of our actions.



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Our great brethren in Hebrews 11, the beloved faithful who endured Nero's reign, they did not compromise their convictions. However, they also accepted the horrible consequences of their actions. At this point in time in America we do still have constitutionally protected rights and legal recourse. I believe those are blessings God has allowed us to have and we should use them to the fullest extent possible. However, if our rights are violated and we are arrested for teaching the truth, I shudder to think of video of a brother or sister in Christ fighting the police airing on the news. As Paul has just described in detail in chapter 12, our job as Christians is to honor our God in *all* things.

How are you and your family preparing to balance these truths in your lives going forward?

Are we as Christians using the freedoms we currently have as God would have us to, or have we taken them for granted? Do we even view our freedom as a gift from God?

Read Romans 13:3-4

As a mother of four I can't help but think of my children when I read this section. Do my children have anything to fear if they have been obedient? Absolutely not. However, there are not a million jokes about the "mom look" for no reason. I believe so many struggle with respecting authority (employers, police, etc.) because they are not taught this level of respect at home. Parents take blame and feel guilt for disciplining their children, so they simply don't do it.

One thing we have been intentional about with our children is making sure they understand why they are being disciplined, and that in fact the discipline was their choice. For instance, if one of our kiddos told a lie the conversation would go something like this:

- Me: What happened?
- Kid: I told a lie.
- Me: What's going to happen now?
- Kid: I'm going to get a spanking.
- Me: Why are you going to get a spanking?
- Kid: Because I lied.
- Me: So who chose for you to get a spanking?
- Kid: I did.
- Me: How did you choose to get a spanking?
- Kid: Because I chose to lie.
- Me: Exactly. Mommy loves you and doesn't like to spank you, but you know that God says we aren't to lie, so if you choose to tell a lie then you choose for me to spank you, I don't have a choice because I love you *so much* I want you to obey God.

As our kids were growing up we would have some version of this conversation every time discipline was needed (and no, it wasn't always a spanking, although I believe at times a spanking is appropriate Proverbs 13:24). This served two purposes: first of all it placed God and His



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expectations as the ultimately authority, and secondly it placed the responsibility/consequences of their actions solely on the child. Why do I want my children to respect my authority? Because my primary goal is for them to learn to respect God's authority. Why is Paul telling us to respect our government's authority? Because his primary goal is for us to respect God's authority.

Also, within this text we see the full extent to which the government has authority: because the government bears the sword as God's avenger (same root word as justice.) This means that yes, the death penalty is biblically acceptable. This is not a new concept in Scripture, as it was seen repeatedly in the Old Law (Genesis 9:6, Exodus 21:12).

How can we do a better job of reflecting God as the ultimate authority, and teaching a respect for authority in our homes and congregations?

Read Romans 13:5-7

Always remember; when you see a "therefore," ask what it's there for. Paul is referring to what he has just said: because the government has been given its authority by God we must be in subjection and pay our taxes. But what does he mean when he states, "for the sake of conscience?" Referring back to 12:1-2, if we are being transformed into the image of Christ, our conscience should be pricked if we try to cheat or steal from anyone, including the government.

Paul doesn't limit paying what is owed to the government, who else does he include in this command? What should this look like in our lives?

Read Romans 13:8-10

Paul's statement of "Owe no one anything," is not one that I have heard taught on. In the context Paul seems to be expounding upon the idea of paying our debts, however it also seems that a Christian should avoid being in debt whenever possible. This is certainly not a popular idea today, however debt-free living is significantly more peaceful than having to worry about how to make the next credit card payment. Yet I don't believe this is all the context applies to.

This is in the context of Paul discussing how we are to interact with each other. Repeatedly throughout the book of Acts we find the brethren taking what they owned and selling it, giving the proceeds to the brethren in need. We never find an example of brethren loaning money to each other, and certainly not of charging interest. In fact, under the Old Law charging interest was forbidden (Exodus 22:25). I know that there are extenuating circumstances, and I would certainly never discourage someone from helping simply because they needed it to be a loan rather than a gift. However, I do believe that Paul is giving us a fundamental foundation of how we are to interact with each other.

Why is this so important? Because we love each other. We aren't trying to take advantage of each other, we each truly want what is best for the other. This certainly goes both ways: we shouldn't be an added burden to the brethren, demanding that they take care of us instead of taking care of



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ourselves, when possible, but we should also be willing to go above and beyond to help when someone has need. When reading this I can't help but remember the words of Jesus in Luke 10:25-37.

How did Jesus define who our neighbor is?

How do we show this type of love to our brethren?

As individuals and as a congregation both, how are we showing this type of love to our neighbor?

Read Romans 13:11-14

Wake from sleep brethren! I believe this is certainly a charge Christians in America can heed today! Jesus is closer to returning today than He was yesterday, and many of us have fallen asleep on the job! Paul beautifully describes the maturing process of a Christian in these few verses:

- First, we cast off the works of darkness
- Then we put on the armor of light (Ephesians 6:11-20)
- We walk properly in the light, avoiding works of the flesh
- Then we mature to bearing the image of Christ and focus on Him rather than our own desires.

Notice that each of these is active and intentional on our part. Sometimes I think we

expect new Christians to skip a step or three. We expect them to immediately look and act just like us when they haven't yet had the chance to build up their armor against the enemies' attacks. Which really is terrible timing because before they were baptized into Christ (Romans 6) Satan had them right where he wanted them, and therefore didn't need to attack them. At times I'm afraid when they are most vulnerable instead of surrounding them like a herd of elephants, we leave them defenseless to fend for themselves.

Where are you in this growth process? What do you need to help you move to the next step?

Is there a new Christian in your sphere of influence? If so, how can you help them develop their armor?

In chapters 12 and 13 Paul has covered a lot and given a lot of commands/instructions, summarize how all of this fits together and how you will apply it to your life.

Pollard, Paul PhD. (2018). Truth for Today, Romans an Exegetical Study. Searcy, AR. Resource Publications.