



Finding Our Political Way

Summary and Goal

How is a follower of Jesus supposed to respond to a non-Christian government? What is our position on submitting to immoral authorities? It is critical for believers to remember who is in control, who our ultimate allegiance is to, and where everything is headed.

Main Passages

Romans 13:1-7

Session Outline

1. The Only Source of True Authority (Romans 13:1-2)
2. Be Subject and Have No Fear (Romans 13:3-5)
3. Perform Your Civic Duty (Romans 13:6-7)

Theological Theme

God is sovereign over earthly rulers.

Christ Connection

Christ demonstrated respect for civic laws (“render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s”) while confronting legalistic religious law.

Missional Application

One of the believer’s greatest opportunities to demonstrate the transformational love of Christ is through loving his or her neighbor. That, in part, means being a model citizen according to earthly authorities unless this is in contradiction with biblical truth.

Historical Context of Romans

Purpose

Paul's purpose in writing Romans can be identified from his direct statements in the text and inferred from the content. He expressly wrote that he wanted to impart spiritual strength to the believers at Rome (1:11-12; 16:25-26). He asked for prayer for the difficult task he was undertaking (15:32) and that he might be able to come and see them (15:30). He hoped to enlist the Roman churches to support a mission to the west (15:23-29). The content of the letter shows that the churches experienced tensions between believers from different backgrounds. Paul wanted them to be united and to avoid dissension and false teaching (16:17-18). The content also reveals his exposition of what is essential Christianity and what are matters of indifference.

Author

Paul the apostle is the stated and indisputable author of the book of Romans. From the book of Acts and statements in Romans, we learn that Paul wrote this letter while he was in Corinth and on his way to Jerusalem in the spring of a.d. 57, to deliver an offering from the Gentile churches to poor Jewish Christians (Ac 20:3; Rm 15:25-29).

Setting

All of Paul's writings grew out of his missionary/pastoral work and were about the problems and needs of local churches. The book of Romans is also of this genre, but it is the least "local" in the sense that Paul had not yet been to Rome. This letter was his opportunity to expound the good news message (the gospel). He could discuss the essence of sin, the salvation accomplished on the cross, the union of the believer with Christ, how the Spirit works in the Christian to promote holiness, the place of the Jewish people in God's plan, future things, and Christian living or ethics. Though Paul did not write Romans as a systematic theology, his somewhat orderly exposition has been the fountain for the development of that discipline.

Special Features

Paul's letter to the Roman house churches has been preeminent among the New Testament writings for its theological and pastoral influence. It focuses on the doctrine of salvation, including the practical implications for believers as they live out the salvation given to them through Jesus Christ.

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Session Plan

Finding Our Political Way

? For Further Discussion

In Matthew 22, what did Jesus' response indicate about His belief regarding the responsibilities of citizenship?

Introduction

- ? How have you found to be the best way to enter into discussion about religion and politics while keeping the conversation civil and respectful? Why is that particularly important for a Christian?
- ? What are some markers that you would expect to see in a person's life that is a "good citizen"? Describe the last time you saw one of those markers lived out in front of you? How did it impact you?

In this week's session, Paul addressed the relationship the believers in Rome were to have with those in authority over them. Particularly because of the persecution the believers in Rome faced as a result of Rome's cult of the Emperor, the believers struggled to navigate how to live under a regime that seemed to deny everything they believed. Paul reminded the believers of the sovereignty of God over all things, including those who exercised worldly authority over them.

1. The Only Source of True Authority (Romans 13:1-2)

Paul's insistence that no earthly ruler rules outside of God's appointment reflected long-held Jewish understanding, which was revealed frequently in the Old Testament. Most notably, perhaps, were the interactions between Daniel and the pagan king Nebuchadnezzar. Those who have ruled have done so solely because God instituted them.

- ? Consider Paul's direction to live in submission to governing authorities. Where in your life is that most difficult to do? What influence does Paul's explanation of those authorities' source of power have on your decisions as a citizen?
- ? How would you say the current culture's opposition compares to the opposition from the Roman Empire? Why do you think so? How does that color your understanding of what Paul was directing his original audience to do?

2. Be Subject and Have No Fear (Romans 13:3-5)

What was Paul's secret to living without perpetual fear of the government? Be a good citizen. That was the whole secret; the Roman believers were to exhibit good conduct. That good conduct would not only alleviate their terror, it would also place them in a position to be rewarded by those same governing authorities. To keep such a statement from sounding hopelessly naïve, Paul returned to the foundation of his argument: the ruler, after all, was God's appointed servant.

- Describe an episode in which a person's public persona aided them in dealing with an issue with governmental ties. How did that person's public persona impact his or her experience? What gospel impact or gospel conversation are you aware of from that incident?
- What feelings do you experience when you read of rulers being used by God as instruments of justice?

3. Perform Your Civic Duty (Romans 13:6-7)

The final two verses of the section deal with a practical outflow of submission to governing authority: taxes. Paul was leading to applied expression of the theologically corrective teaching he had just given. His readers were to exercise their conscience that agreed with God's will and purpose by, in the purest way possible, putting their money where their mouth was.

- How naturally do you associate governmental leaders with "God's servants"? How does the example of Nebuchadnezzar help your understanding?
- How does a believer's required response to governmental authorities change when those authorities attempt to press believers into violating their belief in God? How does the difference between submission and obedience guide that response?

Conclusion

- Who are the governmental authorities that exercise the most influence over your life? How do you pray for them regularly? How would you rate the specificity of your prayers?
- How does it change your perception of government to read the number of times that Paul refers to those leaders as God's servants? How would you say you need to respond when you disagree with those leaders?

? For Further Discussion

Why do you think God's appointment of political leaders can seem like such a conflict of ideals? Consider a candidate that you've not agreed with; how does that change your answer?



Expanded Session Content

Finding Our Political Way

Introduction

Religion and politics are two topics that conventional etiquette indicates are not polite conversation. So when the conversation turns to how these two topics relate to one another, it is not uncommon for everyone to get a little apprehensive. The Herodians and Pharisees knew that; that's why they asked Jesus about it. They were seeking to trap Jesus and, after all, nothing is more inflammatory than mixing politics and religion.

When the leaders asked Jesus if it was lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, Jesus knew exactly why they were asking but, incredibly, decided to answer their impossible question anyway. Taking a coin, Jesus answered a question like He had done so many times before: by asking another question. "Whose image and inscription is this?" (Matt. 22:20) When the conspirators answered His question with the obvious response that it was Caesar's image and inscription, Jesus gave one of the most frequently quoted responses for dealing with civic entanglements. "Give, then, to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." (Matt. 22:21)

When that phrase is lobbed about in discussions in contemporary culture, that last bit about giving God the things that are God's is usually left off. Unfortunately, that's the most important part because what Jesus had used to determine ownership was image. As Genesis 1:26-27 makes clear, that which bears the image of God is not merely minted coins, but humanity. From the beginning, God's ultimate authority has been declared over humanity. The manner in which that is expressed in the governing authorities has become increasingly complex. That complexity, however, is still made clear in the answer Jesus provided to those conspirators two millennia ago.

- ❓ What did Jesus' response indicate about His belief regarding the responsibilities of citizenship?
- ❓ How have you found to be the best way to enter into discussion about religion and politics while keeping the conversation civil and respectful? Why is that particularly important for a Christian?



What are some markers that you would expect to see in a person's life that is a "good citizen"? Describe the last time you saw one of those markers lived out in front of you? How did it impact you?

Session Summary

In this week's session, Paul addressed the relationship the believers in Rome were to have with those in authority over them. Particularly because of the persecution the believers in Rome faced as a result of Rome's cult of the Emperor, the believers struggled to navigate how to live under a regime that seemed to deny everything they believed. Paul reminded the believers of the sovereignty of God over all things, including those who exercised worldly authority over them.

1. The Only Source of True Authority (Romans 13:1-2)

In the verses immediately preceding Romans 13:1-7, Paul wrote in concise, rapid-fire form to communicate a list of traits or marks that would be in the true Christian's life in an increasing capacity. In that list of evidences of transformation, Paul dealt with such heavy matters as how believers are to serve one another with zeal, how believers were to bless those that persecute them, and the importance of leaving revenge to the Lord. Abruptly, at the opening of chapter 13, Paul injected a prolonged section that addressed the solitary topic of how believers were to live in submission to governing authorities. The passage was so abrupt, in fact, that many scholars assert that it was added later by a redactor. However, given the political context within which the Roman believers existed, the application of the love of Christ warranted a word about how they might coexist under such tyranny.

To that end, Paul directed the believers to be subject to governing authorities on the basis that it is God who placed those authorities in their temporary positions of power. The wording was carefully chosen and carried a proportional significance. Specifically, Moo says, "Paul calls on believers to 'submit' to governing authorities rather than to 'obey' them.... To submit is to recognize one's subordinate place in a hierarchy, to acknowledge as a general rule that certain people or institutions have 'authority' over us."² The crucial difference in submission and obedience was elevated when Paul pointed, in the next clause, to the only One who was to be obeyed. There was to be no misunderstanding; the true authority rested with God's sovereign will.

Paul's insistence that no earthly ruler rules outside of God's appointment reflected long-held Jewish understanding, which was revealed frequently in

Authority

The Greek word Paul used for authority (*exousia*) generally referred to the possession of and exercise of power. However, Douglas Moos explains that "the word can also have a concrete application, in which case *exousia* denotes a sphere over which authority is exercised...or the being who exercises authority."¹ That means that the entirety of Paul's discussion of power constantly points to the one who exercises it ultimately.

the Old Testament. Most notably, perhaps, were the interactions between Daniel and the pagan king Nebuchadnezzar. According to Moo, “Paul’s dependence on this tradition and his all-inclusive language (‘there is no authority except’) make clear that he is asserting a universally applicable truth about the ultimate origin of rulers.”³ Those who have ruled have done so solely because God instituted them.

- ❓ Consider Paul’s direction to live in submission to governing authorities. Where in your life is that most difficult to do? What influence does Paul’s explanation of those authorities’ source of power have on your decisions as a citizen?
- ❓ How would you say the current culture’s opposition compares to the opposition from the Roman Empire? Why do you think so? How does that color your understanding of what Paul was directing his original audience to do?

In making clear that his authority for his directive was not from himself, Paul followed the directive with a statement of divine consequences. Precisely that the governing authorities were instituted by God, resisting those governmental officials “resists what God has appointed.” All of a sudden, the seriousness of what Paul was saying was raised several levels. The believers were not merely breaking laws or disrespecting oppressive bureaucrats; they were rejecting that which God Himself had set in place.



Judgment here did not necessarily refer to civic retribution from those spurned government authorities, as Paul had not at this point clarified what he meant by the negative consequence. Still, as the following verses would communicate, it would be naïve for the believers not to associate some sort of civic consequences with the rejection of governmental authorities.

2. Be Subject and Have No Fear (Romans 13:3-5)

Verse 3 introduced the civic function of the appointed authorities, namely, they kept the peace through punishing the bad and rewarding the good. In other words, even in their fallen condition, they were to pursue a form of justice in accordance with God’s purposes for the world. Paul’s connection with rulers and terror was an extremely powerful one for his original audience. The conflict among the Roman believers that had, in part, led Paul to write his letter to them in the first place, was due to the recent return of Jewish believers that had been expelled from Rome for a nine-year period by the emperor, Claudius. When the Jewish believers returned, for almost a decade Gentiles had led the network of house churches that formed the church in Rome. The Jewish believers

were returning from tasting the fury of spurned governmental authority firsthand. Therefore, Paul's presentation of a formula by which rulers were no longer a terror would have been welcomed news.

What was Paul's secret to living without perpetual fear of the government? Be a good citizen. That was the whole secret; the Roman believers were to exhibit good conduct. That good conduct would not only alleviate their terror, it would also place them in a position to be rewarded by those same governing authorities. To keep such a statement from sounding hopelessly naïve, Paul returned to the foundation of his argument: the ruler, after all, was God's appointed servant.

-  Describe an episode in which a person's public persona aided them in dealing with an issue with governmental ties. How did that person's public persona impact his or her experience? What gospel impact or gospel conversation are you aware of from that incident?
-  What feelings do you experience when you read of rulers being used by God as instruments of justice?

Verse 4 portrays the governmental ruler as an instrument of justice on God's behalf. What is more, the ruler is referred to as God's "servant." It would be appropriate at this point to point out that God's servants can serve Him unconsciously. For biblical precedent on the matter, one would need only to return to the episodes of Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar mentioned above. Even Nebuchadnezzar was not aware of Yahweh's activity through him—until God took his sanity. So it would have been for Paul's audience of Roman believers to attach Paul's words here to the Roman emperor.

Precisely because the governing authorities were part of God's appointed leadership in the world, the believers were to submit to them. Paul summarized his argument to this point in verse 5 by highlighting once again the two reasons submission must occur. First, there would be wrath for those who arrogantly refused to submit. Second, the believer was to submit out of conscience. "Conscience" in Paul's usage here referred to "the believer's knowledge of God's will and purposes" according to Moo.⁴ There was a deeper cause for submission to the rulers than conveniently avoiding wrath or staying out of the spotlight of the local authorities. This was more profoundly a matter of agreeing with God's will and purpose.

3. Perform Your Civic Duty (Romans 13:6-7)

The final two verses of the section deal with a practical outflow of submission to governing authority: taxes. Paul was leading to applied expression of the theologically corrective teaching he had just given. His

readers were to exercise their conscience that agreed with God's will and purpose by, in the purest way possible, putting their money where their mouth was. Moo says, "Here Paul is suggesting that the Roman Christians should acknowledge in their own habit of paying taxes to the government an implicit recognition of the authority that the government possesses over them."⁵

As if anticipating the response of his readers, as he had all the way through Romans to this point, Paul once again circled back to the fact that the authorities were God's servants. Because they were God's servants and because of the conscience of the believers to be in agreement with God's will and work in the world, they were to pay the required taxes to the governmental authorities.

Servants of the Lord

In verse 6, Paul used a different word to call the secular rulers God's servants. In this verse, Paul used "leitourgos," which "was used frequently in the LXX [Septuagint] to refer to people who served in the temple, and in the NT it always refers to those who are 'ministering' for the sake of the Lord."⁶

- ❓ How naturally do you associate governmental leaders with "God's servants"? How does the example of Nebuchadnezzar help your understanding?
- ❓ How does a believer's required response to governmental authorities change when those authorities attempt to press believers into violating their belief in God? How does the difference between submission and obedience guide that response?

When those who are imbued with power and authority abuse such power as a way to force God's people to reject God, a break always comes in the biblical record. The nations God used to judge His people were judged themselves for the cruelty with which they accomplished that task.




Conclusion

Paul's letter to the Roman Christians was one of the few letters he wrote to churches he did not plant. Remarkably, with its scope and depth of theological richness, the letter was to a group of believers Paul only knew by reputation. One of the great challenges Paul had was speaking into the troubled context of the divided church in the midst of a tyrannical regime. In doing so, however, he provided great application for believers today.

First, God is our only ultimate authority. When seeking to apply this extremely difficult text in the delicacy of living as a believer in a world that seeks to reject Christ, the foundation of any path toward our political way is the ultimate authority of God. While God may have instituted the governmental authorities, that has no guaranteed bearing on the individual leaders' spiritual condition. In light of that, when the submission of good citizenship conflicts with the spiritual doctrine of the Christian's belief system, the Christian must remember that only God is sovereign and ultimately authoritative.

Second, the manner in which a believer lives in society matters to God. The admonition to live in submission to secular rulers is well applied in the type of citizen the believer is. Living in submission to governing authorities means obeying the law, living up to financial responsibilities, exercising the rights afforded by that government, and loving one's neighbor as himself or herself. Consider the relational condition of our culture. The profound impact a believer can make in simply loving those God has entrusted to him or her as neighbors is incredible. God cares how His people live in society.

Third, part of submitting to governmental authorities is praying for them. If the function of government and the appointing of its leaders are an act of God, then the prayer support of those appointed leaders is a spiritual matter. In an age when information is not only accessible, but inescapable, believers have great access to information that can inform the way they pray for the leaders that God has appointed over them. In addition to praying for those leaders, the believer has the opportunity through local offices to make their prayer support for that leader known.

-  Who are the governmental authorities that exercise the most influence over your life? How do you pray for them regularly? How would you rate the specificity of your prayers?
-  How does it change your perception of government to read the number of times that Paul refers to those leaders as God's servants? How would you say you need to respond when you disagree with those leaders?
-  Why do you think God's appointment of political leaders can seem like such a conflict of ideals? Consider a candidate that you've not agreed with; how does that change your answer?

Prayer of Response

Close in prayer thanking God that He is completely in control of the political rulers of the world. Pray that He would lead you to live in light of these authorities in a way that honors Him. Pray for guidance on how to best respond in times when leaders stray from biblical morality.

Additional Resources

- *Politics* by Wayne Grudem
- *Onward* by Russell Moore
- *How the Nations Rage* by Jonathan Leeman

For Next Week

Session Title

- Finding Our Way With Gender

Main Passages

- Genesis 1:27; Psalm 139:13-16

Session Outline

1. Let's Start at the Beginning (Genesis 1:27)
2. The Wonder of Creation (Psalm 139:13-14)
3. God's Wisdom Before the Beginning (Psalm 139:15-16)

Memorize

Let everyone submit to the governing authorities, since there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are instituted by God.

-Romans 13:1

Daily Readings

- Monday - Genesis 2:18-25
- Tuesday - Genesis 5:1-2
- Wednesday - Romans 1:22-23
- Thursday - Titus 2:1-8
- Friday - Deuteronomy 22:5
- Saturday - Galatians 3:28

Extended Commentary

Romans 13:1-7

13:1. When it came to presenting oneself as a living sacrifice to God, Paul “urged” the Christians to do so (Rom. 12:1). But when it came to submitting oneself to the governing authorities of the land, urging was replaced by commanding: Everyone must submit himself (*hupotasso*; present passive imperative) to the governing authorities. Why the imperative, the command? Because, in principle (though not always in specifics), to submit to the civil authority is to submit to God. The statement in this command which unlocks its meaning, and which gives Christians ground to accept it and apply it, is this: There is no authority except that which God has established. This is a statement of the overarching sovereignty and rule of God in the affairs of this world. If God has appointed every civil ruler, every governing authority, then why should any Christian fear submitting to that which God has appointed?

What Paul wanted the believers in Rome to understand was that, in the Roman Empire (or any other), “No one from the east or the west or from the desert can exalt a man. But it is God who judges: He brings one down, he exalts another” (Ps. 75:6-7). And even after he is in office, “The king’s heart is in the hand of the Lord; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases” (Prov. 21:1). Therefore, Caligula, Claudius, and Nero (those Roman emperors spanning the lifetime of the Roman church up until Paul’s writing) had ascended to power with God’s permission—actually, by his direction (*have been established by God*)—as have the rulers of today.

13:2. Rebelling against what God has instituted will bring the judgment of God, more than likely through the rulers themselves. While we are painfully (shamefully) aware of the fist we raise against God in some areas of life, it is sometimes hard to see it here. If an earthquake destroys our town, or a disease ravages our body, or a deranged person violates our personal or property rights, we can rest in the sovereignty of God more easily than we can when a twenty-something police officer pulls us over for rolling through a stop sign. We looked both ways, we slowed almost completely to a stop, we have a (reasonably) good driving record, we were under the influence of nothing—and yet we still got a ticket.

Paul says that to rebel against that ticket is to rebel against what God has instituted. If we rebel against it loudly enough, or aggressively enough, or persistently enough, we may be punished with an additional fine for

disorderly conduct, interfering with a police officer's duty, or touching (assaulting) a police officer.

The question of civil disobedience is not an easy one, nor a new one. When the apostles Peter and John were told by Jewish leaders “not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. . . Peter and John replied, ‘Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God’s sight to obey you rather than God... We must obey God rather than men’ “ (Acts 4:18-19; 5:29). There obviously comes a time when governing authorities are to be “resisted” (the question of “How?” is another worthy discussion) through disobedience to their injunctions. The key to discerning when that time has come is found in Paul’s words, what God has instituted. When rulers put themselves in the place of God by legislating moral or spiritual positions (all acts have moral and spiritual roots) which are contrary to the revealed positions of God, resistance is warranted.

Paul’s emphasis here is a civil version of his words in Romans 12:18: “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” Live within the system and do not rebel against the rulers on nonessential matters—the gospel will be spread more effectively when you do.

13:3-5. Paul next explains the “why?” behind his statement in verse 2 that to rebel against authorities is to invite judgment upon oneself. In an “ideal” world, governing authorities are God’s servant[s] to do you good. . . to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. The world is not a governmental theocracy in which God is king. Since Israel abandoned the direct theocratic rule God desired for them, and asked God for a king like “all the nations around us” (1 Sam. 8:5,20), even his chosen people have been governed by human rulers. There is no direct, geopolitical theocratic rule in place today; all people on earth are ruled by some sort of human authority. In Israel’s case, this was to be a good thing (witness the moral and civil law codes given to Israel to protect their best interests) and should be a good thing for all nations.

Paul’s last word in his explanation concerns motivation. While avoiding punishment is always a legitimate motivation for submitting to an authority, there is a higher motivation for the Christian’s submission to the authorities—the motivation of a clear conscience. One of the verses cited above— Proverbs 24:21—illuminates Paul’s words: “Fear the LORD and the king, my son, and do not join with the rebellious.” For one to say that he or she fears God while acting with impudence toward governing authorities presents a contradiction which cannot stand in the face of conscience.

That is, in order to keep a clear conscience, the Christian must submit to governing authorities (Rom 13:1). Christians must pay their taxes, obey the speed limit, buy fishing and hunting licenses, wear their seat belts, and do a myriad of other things they would rather not do—and do them all in both the letter and spirit of the law. A conscience is not an infallible guide, as Paul said—“My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent” (1 Cor. 4:4)—but it is a place to start.

13:6-7. Shades of Levitical legislation are apparent in Paul’s next words. Just as the Levites in Israel were to be supported by the twelve tribes, so governing authorities are to be supported by taxes on the people. Added impetus is given to Paul’s words by his change of terms from verse 4. There, God’s “servant” is twice designated by *diakonos*, the word which is also used to describe those who minister and serve in the church (e.g., Rom. 16:1; 1 Tim. 4:6). But in verse 6, Paul uses a different word for servant, *leitourgos*, a word used for someone who serves in behalf of another. The former word speaks of the activity, the latter the activity as representing another (see *leitourgos* used of Christ [Heb. 8:2], angels [Heb. 1:7], Paul [Rom. 15:16], and Epaphroditus [Phil. 2:25]).

With regard to the government, the Christian is to be “debtless”—he or she is not to be found owing taxes. . . revenue. . . respect... [or] honor to any governing authority. Jesus Christ himself validated Paul’s position in his famous “give to Caesar what is Caesar’s” statement (Matt. 22:15-22). Paul does allow for one debt to remain outstanding, however, but not to public officials. He mentions that debt in the next part of chapter 13 before getting to the real reason for living in obedience to the ruling authorities—the approaching end of the age (13:11-14).⁷

References

1. Moo, Douglas J. *The Epistle to the Romans*. NICNT. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1996.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Boa, Kenneth, and William Kruidenier. *Romans*. Holman New Testament Commentary. Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2000.