



## Group Discussion Guide

### Romans 13

For groups meeting June 21 evening through June 28 morning.

The humble attitude that Paul advocated for in Romans 12 carries over into the next chapter, which includes instruction about how live under the authority of others. There is much to consider regarding Paul's own experience with authority, and the Christian church's experience through the years. For a detailed commentary on this theme in Romans 13:1-7, I have included the perspective of F.F. Bruce (pages 3-5 of this discussion guide).

Paul wrote that each of us is to "be subject to the governing authorities," (v. 1). He reminded his readers that God has put these authorities in place and that those resists them also "resists what God has appointed" and this will lead to judgment (v. 2). Paul went so far to state that those in authority are placed there "for your good," those who do good have no reason to fear authorities, and those in authority are servants of God who carry out His judgment on those who do wrong (vs. 3-4). This attitude of subjection, Paul wrote, also gives the believer a clear conscience (v. 5). Finally, Paul instructed believers to pay taxes that are owed, revenue that is owed, and to give respect and honor to those in authority.

This of course all seems to make perfect sense when those in authority seem to abide by what is right. But, we who believe are left to wonder what we are to do when those in authority are corrupt, or when they even order us to disobey God. We are also instructed to seek justice, and to follow God's ways and not the ways of the world. While the full commentary from Bruce is part of this discussion guide, I want to place the section that addresses this question for your quick reference below:

*But what if the authorities themselves are unrighteous? What if Caesar, not content with receiving what is rightfully his, lays claim to 'the things that are God's'? Paul does not deal with this question here, presumably because it had not yet arisen; but it was to be a burning question in the Roman state for generations to come. Caesar could so far exceed the limits of his divinely-given jurisdiction as to claim divine honours for himself and wage war against the saints. Can we recognize Paul's magistrate, the 'minister of God', in John's 'beast from the abyss', who receives his authority from the great red dragon and uses it to enforce universal worship of himself and to exterminate those who withhold worship from him? We can indeed, for Paul himself foresaw precisely such a development when the restraint of law was withdrawn (2 Thess. 2:6-10). 'Without justice', said Augustine, 'what are kingdoms but great gangs of bandits?'*

*Yet the evidence shows how, in face of gross provocation, Christians maintained their proper loyalty to the state, not least in Rome itself. 'The patience and faith of the saints'*

*wore down the fury of persecution. When the decrees of the civil magistrate conflict with the commandments of God, then, say Christians, 'we must obey God rather than men' (Acts 5:29); when Caesar claims divine honours, Christians must answer 'No'. For then Caesar (whether he takes the form of a dictator or a democracy) is going beyond the authority delegated to him by God, and trespassing on territory which is not his. 'Regarding the State's requirement of worship of Caesar's image,' says Oscar Cullmann, 'Paul would not have spoken otherwise than the author of the Johannine Apocalypse.' But Christians will voice their 'No' to Caesar's unauthorized demands the more effectively if they have shown themselves ready to say 'Yes' to his authorized demands.*

*F. F. Bruce, Romans: An Introduction and Commentary, vol. 6, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 233–234.*

Paul played off of his theme of paying what is owed and connected it to loving others. He wrote that believers should not be obligated to others except for the obligation to love, and that loving others fulfills the law of God (v. 8). He then quotes several of the commandments that deal with relationships among people, and states these can be summarized by Leviticus 19:18, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," (v. 9). Those who love do not wrong their neighbor, and because of this, love fulfills the law of God (v. 10).

In the final section of chapter 13 (vs. 11-14), Paul reminded his readers that the time had come for them to refocus their lives on walking with Jesus, especially in light of his second coming. Paul indicated there was an urgency to this; that "salvation is nearer to us now" (v. 11) and "the day is at hand" (v. 12). He wrote it was time to throw off any evil actions and "put on the armor of light," which connects with his instructions in Ephesians 6:11-13 and 1 Thessalonians 5:8. There is no time for the believer to be engaged in evil activities, of which he named several (v. 13). Instead, he instructed believers to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ," which along with verse 12 indicates we have an active role to play in living faithful to Jesus. In conjunction with this, he wrote we are to "make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires" (v. 14). This demonstrates the idea that we cannot even entertain thoughts about how to fulfill any evil desires we might have. In fact, the New Living Translation reads:

*Instead, clothe yourself with the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ. And don't let yourself think about ways to indulge your evil desires. (Romans 13:14)*

## THE CHRISTIAN AND THE STATE (13:1–7)

When guidelines are laid down for the behaviour of Christians towards those who are outside the fellowship, it is natural that something should be said about the Christian's relation to the secular authorities—municipal, provincial or imperial. This subject was destined to become specially acute within the decade following the writing of this letter.

So long as the church was mainly Jewish in composition, problems in this sphere were not lacking, but they were not so difficult as they were later to become. The position of Jews within the Roman Empire was regulated by a succession of imperial edicts. Indeed, as a subject nation within the empire, they enjoyed quite exceptional privileges. Jewish communities had the status of *collegia licita* ('permitted associations'). The various practices which marked off Jews from Gentiles were confirmed to them. Those practices might seem absurd and superstitious in Roman eyes, but they were safeguarded none the less by imperial law. They included the sabbath law and food laws and the prohibition of 'graven images'. Imperial policy forbade governors of Judea to bring military standards, with the emperor's image attached to them, within the walls of the holy city of Jerusalem. If by Jewish law the trespassing of a Gentile within the inner courts of the Jerusalem temple was a sacrilege deserving the death penalty, Rome confirmed Jewish law in this respect even (quite exceptionally) to the point of allowing the execution of the death sentence for such a trespass when the offender was a Roman citizen.

In the first generation after the death of Christ Roman law, when it took cognizance of Christians at all, tended to regard them as a variety of Jews. When the Corinthian Jews in AD 51 or 52 accused Paul before Gallio, proconsul of Achaia, of propagating an illegal religion, Gallio paid little attention to the charge (Acts 18:12–17). To him Paul was as self-evidently a Jew as his accusers were, and the dispute between him and them was in Gallio's eyes a difference of interpretation on points of Jewish law, and he had not come to Achaia to adjudicate on matters of that kind.

Gallio's decision constituted an important precedent; for some ten years thereafter Paul availed himself of the protection which it gave him in his apostolic service, as he continued to propagate the Christian faith not only in the provinces of the Roman Empire but in Rome itself (Acts 28:30–31).

His happy experience of Roman justice is probably reflected in his insistence here that the magistrates, whom he calls 'ministers of God' (verse 6), 'are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad' (verse 3). Yet the principles laid down here were valid even when the authorities were not so benevolent towards Christians as Gallio had been (in effect) towards Paul.

There is another side to the picture of Christianity's relation to the state. Christianity started out with a most serious handicap in the eyes of Roman law, for the sufficient reason that its founder had been convicted and executed on a charge of sedition by the sentence of a Roman judge. The charge was summed up in the inscription attached to his cross: 'The King of the Jews.' Whatever was the nature of the kingship which Jesus claimed, the one record of him known to Roman law was that he had led a movement which challenged the sovereign rights of Caesar. When Tacitus, many years later, wishes his readers to know what kind of people Christians were, he deems it sufficient to say that 'they got their name from Christ, who was executed under the procurator Pontius Pilate when Tiberius was emperor'. That adequately indicated their character. When, some seven years before the writing of this letter, Paul's

opponents at Thessalonica wished to stir up as much trouble for him and his companions locally as they could, they went to the city magistrates and laid information against them: 'These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here ... They are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus' (Acts 17:6–7, NIV). This subtle misrepresentation of the truth was calculated to link the missionaries with contemporary fomenters of unrest in Jewish communities throughout the Roman world; it was rendered the more colourable by the fact that Jesus himself had been found guilty before Pilate as an agitator and leader of insurrection.

Nor was Thessalonica the only place where trouble of this kind broke out about the same time. Rome itself remembered the riots of AD 49, stirred up 'at the instigation of Chrestus', which had moved Claudius to expel the Jewish community of the capital; and some of Paul's readers may well have cherished resentment for hardships endured in the course of that expulsion. As for Paul himself, even his best friends could not deny that his arrival in a city was, as often as not, a signal for breaches of the peace. Granted that Paul was not responsible for this, the custodians of law and order would naturally take note of it and draw their own conclusions. It was all the more necessary, therefore, that Christians should be specially careful of their public behaviour and give their traducers no handle against them, but rather pay all due honour and obedience to the authorities. Indeed, Jesus had set them a precedent in this matter, as in so much else, for although his words, 'Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's' (Mark 12:17), referred to a specially delicate issue—the payment of tribute to a pagan ruler by the people of God living in the holy land—they express a principle of more general application.

Paul places the whole question on the highest plane. God is the fount of all authority, and those who exercise authority on earth do so by delegation from him; therefore to disobey them is to disobey God. Human government is a divine ordinance, and the powers of coercion and commendation which it exercises have been entrusted to it by God, for the repression of crime and the encouragement of righteousness. Christians of all people, then, ought to obey the laws, pay their taxes and respect the authorities—not because it will be the worse for them if they do not, but because this is one way of serving God.

But what if the authorities themselves are unrighteous? What if Caesar, not content with receiving what is rightfully his, lays claim to 'the things that are God's'? Paul does not deal with this question here, presumably because it had not yet arisen; but it was to be a burning question in the Roman state for generations to come. Caesar could so far exceed the limits of his divinely-given jurisdiction as to claim divine honours for himself and wage war against the saints. Can we recognize Paul's magistrate, the 'minister of God', in John's 'beast from the abyss', who receives his authority from the great red dragon and uses it to enforce universal worship of himself and to exterminate those who withhold worship from him? We can indeed, for Paul himself foresaw precisely such a development when the restraint of law was withdrawn (2 Thess. 2:6–10). 'Without justice', said Augustine, 'what are kingdoms but great gangs of bandits?'

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when Caesar claims divine honours, Christians must answer 'No'. For then Caesar (whether he takes the form of a dictator or a democracy) is going beyond the authority delegated to him by God, and trespassing on territory which is not his. 'Regarding the State's requirement of worship of Caesar's image,' says Oscar Cullmann, 'Paul would not have spoken otherwise than the author of the Johannine Apocalypse.' But Christians will voice their 'No' to Caesar's unauthorized demands the more effectively if they have shown themselves ready to say 'Yes' to his authorized demands.

Some years later, in a document written from Rome on the eve of a fiery persecution, we hear an echo of these words of Paul: 'Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right ... Let none of you suffer as a murderer, or a thief, or a wrongdoer, or a mischief-maker; yet if one suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but under that name let him glorify God' (1 Pet. 2:13–14; 4:15–16).

Later still, in the last years of the first century, a leader in the Roman church who could remember the outrageous ferocity of the Neronian persecution thirty years before, and had very recent experience of Domitian's malevolence, reproduces a prayer for the rulers who have received 'glory and honour and power' over earthly things from God, the eternal king, 'that they may administer with piety, in peace and gentleness, the authority given to them'. Such language shows how seriously the Roman church took to heart Paul's injunctions about the duty of Christians to the powers that be.

*F. F. Bruce, Romans: An Introduction and Commentary, vol. 6, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 230–234.*

## Discussion Questions

1. What is your first reaction to Paul's writing about how we should be subject to those who are in positions of authority in our structure of government? What do you think is at the heart of that reaction?
2. Is it difficult for you to accept that those in authority have been placed there by God? Why or why not?
3. Why do you think Paul chose not to address how to respond to someone in authority who is unjust, cruel, and/or attempts to lead others to violate God's commands? How should we handle that type of situation?
4. Based on what you read in verses 1-7, what should living in subjection to authorities look like as you practice this on a daily basis?
5. Why do you think Paul writes about love as something we must "owe" to others? How does this compare to the world's view of love? How does the truth that "love is the fulfilling of the law" (v. 10) affect your understanding of love?
6. How are you challenged by Paul's admonition to "cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light" (v. 12)? What does it mean to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ" (v. 14)? How do we pursue this, and be active in not giving space in our minds to entertain sinful desires?