

“Renewing our Minds About Government”

Romans 13

We love Canada. It’s a great place to live and we enjoy the freedoms that we have; a lot more than many countries in the world. Canada ranks 2nd in the best countries of the world to live in list, second only to Switzerland. But is it a great place for followers of Jesus to live in? Prayer and the 10 commandments are no longer allowed in the public education system. Canada has one of the most liberal abortion laws in the world. Canada is a trend setter with gay marriages and sex education for children and legalizing marijuana. So how do Jesus’ disciples like you and me live faithfully for God in a country that is slowly squeezing God out of the picture?

John Piper calls Romans 13 one of the toughest passages for Christians to follow. Especially because Paul seems to talk with broad strokes and doesn’t seem to have any exceptions, but Paul knows his Bible and he does leave room for righteous civil disobedience as we’ll see. When Paul wrote this (57 AD) Nero had just taken the throne and hadn’t shone his true colours yet. The first 5 years of his reign were quite promising as he vowed he would bring real peace; not the forced-with-the-sword peace that his predecessors had used, in particular the last Emperor Claudius. Paul’s letter – which he was certain Roman authorities would read – has a message for them as well as for God’s people.

Paul essentially has two main points he wants to make: first, that . . .

Jesus’ Disciples are Obligated to Obey Government **(13:1-7)**

When Paul commands Christians to obey the government, he means for them to obey the legitimate laws that everyone needs to follow in order for peace to happen. Revenge is not the answer – which he just commanded us not to do in 12:17-21. Perhaps Paul was referring to the zealots who were seeking to overthrow government by violence. Paul was a zealot himself before his conversion, when as young Saul he sought to root out Christianity through violence. That didn’t work either.

But the reason why we should obey the basic laws of our country is . . .

As a testimony to God (vv. 1-2)

Followers of Jesus should be law abiding citizens not because that’s what the law says but because that’s what the Lord says.

Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. ²Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves.

God, the governor of the world, created human government for the purpose of people receiving justice when wronged and to live in peace when they obey. It is the law to stop at stop signs so

people won't get hurt. If you've driven in countries where a stop sign is ignored, its chaos and the chance of harm is greatly increased! We are not supposed to text and drive because it's a good law and God is the orchestrator of good laws. But if we do we get fined and lose points so the signs on the 401 remind us. Judgment through fines or loss of license or jail are the consequences of disobedience. But don't do it just because the law says so, do it as a testimony to God. Because when Jesus followers disobey the Law it reflects poorly on our faith, on God and Jesus. Notice Paul calls breaking the law in v.2, 'rebellion against God'.

Now in Paul's day, Christians were viewed with suspicion. They were accused of rebelling against the Emperor, who Rome claimed was a god. Many of the early Christians were Jewish too, which created disturbances between saved Jews and unsaved Jews. Emperor Claudius ordered the expulsion of Jews from the city of Rome (mentioned in Acts 18:2) possibly because he misunderstood the difference between Jesus' following Jews and those who rejected Jesus. When Nero took power, he allowed the Jews to return to Rome. As we've already mentioned, there were tensions between Christian Jews and Gentile Christians, so Paul is commanding all believers to obey the legitimate laws of government . . .

To show authorities that Christians pose no threats (vv.3-5)

When government works well, Paul says, disobedience is punished and good citizenship is rewarded. Paul's question 'Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority?' seems to imply some were taking their chances, perhaps in zealot activity; stealing from the Romans here and there, perhaps doing some damage to Roman property or as we guess from v.6 withholding taxes. If you disobey the law, Paul says, eventually you will get caught. Don't give the Romans, who are already leery of Christians because of a few bad apples, a reason to see us as a threat. Jesus followers should be the best citizens who seek the betterment of everyone and the culture and government around them. Sadly, some Christians because of their rebellious attitudes have given governments a reason to try and silence Christians. To paint them as homophobes, hate-mongers and rioters. Paul tells us to live in such a way that the government sees we are no threat to them. Instead, as Paul points out in vv.6-7,

To do our part towards an ordered society (vv.6-7)

⁶ This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. ⁷ Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.

Paul tells us we owe it to God to pay our taxes, and to honour those in authority; government officials, police, firefighters, educators, etc. Because they are there for our protection and best interests. They themselves will be held accountable to God how they served if they didn't protect us or used their authority to serve themselves. And here's a message Paul was giving to Rome; the emperor is not a god and is a servant of the One God. This certainly wouldn't have sat well with those in power, that they only had temporal and borrowed power allowed by God.

God sent this message to other world leaders in the Scriptures. The Pharaoh who opposed Moses, Nebuchadnezzar who thought he was so great he made a 90-foot statue of himself covered in gold. God called Cyrus, king of Persia, His servant because God used Cyrus to let the Israelites to return to their land after exile in Babylonian exile for 70 years.

Paul's purpose here was not to give a full-blown theology on how Jesus' followers should relate to government. But he would tell Timothy in 1 Tim. 2 that Christians have another role to play in helping society function for everyone's well being,

***Including praying for our government (1 Tim. 2:1-7)**

I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people—² for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. ³ This is good, and pleases God our Savior, ⁴ who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. ⁵ For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, ⁶ who gave himself as a ransom for all people. This has now been witnessed to at the proper time. ⁷ And for this purpose I was appointed a herald and an apostle—I am telling the truth, I am not lying—and a true and faithful teacher of the Gentiles.

Paul says to pray for our government leaders so that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. A democracy lends itself more to this kind of atmosphere, however, all kinds of Christians living in persecution still live in godliness and holiness. Paul says this kind of praying pleases God who wants all people to be saved. Implied I believe here is to pray for the salvation of those in authority. Do we pray as often as we complain about our Prime Minister or Premier? What if praying for them became our mandate? God can change the hearts of anyone. There are Christians in government and we need to pray that they live lives of godliness and holiness so they can be the light God wants them to be and impact others in leadership.

Paul would agree with Scripture that doing our part towards bettering society also,

***Includes opposing government when they oppose God**

There are many examples in Scripture of righteous disobedience. The Israeli midwives refused the Pharaoh's direct order to kill all boys born but to let the girls live. God's laws overrule man's laws so when human laws violate God's laws we cannot go along.

Mordecai refused to bow down to Haman probably because he saw it, as the Persians did, as an act of worship. The Persians, like the Romans, sought to deify their leaders. Daniel violated the law that said no prayer can be made to anyone other than Darius, the Persian King. Daniel continued his thrice daily habit of praying with his window open to Jerusalem. And Peter, John and the other apostles were arrested and beaten in Acts 5 because they refused to be silent about the gospel. Their famous line was, "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). None of these acts of disobedience were violent or hurt anyone. They were quiet refusals based on what God's Word declared.

In vv.8-14 Paul moves from the believer's relationship with government leaders to his/her relationship with the people they live beside, who all serve government. Jesus' disciples are obligated to obey government as well as,

Jesus' Disciples are Obligated to Serve People **(13:8-14)**

We live in communities serving under the same leaders. So, we need to work together to help our government stay strong and best serve all people.

⁸ Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law. ⁹ The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery," "You shall not murder," "You shall not steal," "You shall not covet," and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." ¹⁰ Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore, love is the fulfillment of the law.

Paul picks up from our obligation to pay the debt of taxes to the obligation of being indebted to serve the people in our communities . . .

As a testimony to the Word of God (vv.8-10)

Paul quotes a number of the commandments as an example of how we serve and show love to our neighbours. Adultery ruins marriages and families, creating all kinds of social problems in our culture. Hatred and murder destroys lives and ruins your own life. Stealing and coveting creates insecurity, distrust and isolationism tendencies. Obeying God's Laws elevates the Word of God in our community by pointing people to God Himself. The basic laws we have in society are rooted in the Word of God. So obeying laws in essence is a testimony to God's law.

This is how we show love - agape love - sacrificially setting aside our desires for other's needs, regardless of whether that love is reciprocated. It's not a feeling, its an act of the will. It's a choice we make or don't make.

And here's one more reason why followers of Jesus must serve people and be the best citizens we can be:

To show we live for the future and not the present (vv.11-14)

¹¹ And do this, understanding the present time. The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. ¹² The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. ¹³ Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. ¹⁴ Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature.

Only followers of Jesus understand how the world will end, that a terrible period of judgment is coming on the world one day as God predicted through His prophets. But we also know from 2 Peter 3:9 that God is delaying judgment because He wants people to be saved. Every day our 'salvation' (used here in the sense of our final resting place in God's kingdom) is nearer today than yesterday therefore we should live exemplary lives, not like those who live for the temporal satisfactions of the sinful nature. When we obey the laws and respect the lives of others by not hating, not being unfaithful to our spouses and not coveting we show we're living for something beyond this world; we're living this way to please God and to prepare us for the new life in His future kingdom,

***Because Jesus is returning (vv.11-12)**

The 'night' is nearly over, the day is almost here' is a reference to the Day of the Lord judgment followed by Jesus' return. This is one of the motivating factors why we're to live obedient lives; we have to give an account as to how we lived our life.

⁸ We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord. ⁹ So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from

it. ¹⁰ For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.

The lifestyle of the Rome of Paul's day was decadent. This was what many were saved out of and people's lives don't change overnight. What Paul is asking the Roman believers not to do may seem a surprise to us but if this is what the culture was all about then this is how many of them used to live. To live counter cultural in any time of earth's history always spoke volumes to those around you. Paul is urging all Jesus followers to live as if Jesus were coming back tomorrow not as if there was no tomorrow and you have to grab it all today.

And of course, Paul had one more significant reason why we should live for the future and not for the present,

***Because the lost need to see Jesus in us (vv.13-14)**

The solution to not living like the world is to 'clothe ourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ.' Jesus is Lord, not the political leaders of our world. We have to think differently than the world. Notice Paul comes back to the mind again here: *"Do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature."* The word desire is "lusts". We all have legitimate needs that are satisfied in godly relationships but when the culture around us doesn't live this way we have to make sure we're thinking right so we live right. Because if the world doesn't see how Jesus makes a difference in us they won't be convinced He can make a difference in their life. Listen to the apostle Peter who wrote his letter about 10 years later at the height of Nero's persecutions of Christians:

¹ Pet. 2:11 Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. ¹² Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

The only way the pagans (unsaved) will glorify God is if they accept Jesus themselves. How will that happen? Peter says it will happen if they see it by the way we live; not living for the sinful desires of the flesh the way the world does and not retaliating against accusations (revenge) the way the world does. And it's attractive to them because they're tired of living empty lives.

Paul says if you want to change the government you live under, be God-fearing and respectful citizens that assure our leaders we are praying for them and are not a threat to them. And some of them will come to know Christ.

This is a radical chapter in Scripture because if we're honest we complain about our government just as much as the unsaved. So we need to stop complaining and then we will shine as lights in this dark world. We need to start praying (replace a negative/sinful habit with a positive/spiritual habit) when we're tempted to complain. We need to obey the laws of our land that protect everyone. And we need to respectfully oppose godless laws through peaceful means and through the appropriate channels. Only then will we earn the right to be heard and have opportunities to share Jesus.

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If you have any comments or questions about this message please contact us at oliviet@rideau.net