



# An Overview of Paul's Letter to the Romans

## (14) Our Responsibility to Government and General Exhortations

Romans 13

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Romans 13. This is the second chapter in the section in Paul's letter to the Romans that deals with the life which flows from the gospel. The first eight chapters give a summary of the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ. Chapters 9-11 deal with the question of why most of the Jewish people did not receive Jesus as their promised saviour. And chapters 12 through 15:13 deal with the way of life that the gospel is intended to produce. We are not saved by our obedience, but we are saved unto obedience and this section describes what that life of obedience should look like.

The whole of this section is an elaboration of 12:1-2 which says, "I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect." Verses 3-13 of chapter 12 deal with life within the body of Christ, teaching about the spiritual gifts and practical love. Verses 14-21 of chapter 12 focus on how Christians are to deal with persecution and being wronged by others. And so, we come to chapter 13. In chapter 13 we have three sections, the first deals teach us how we are to submit to governing authorities, the second, is another exhortation to love and also teaches about the relationship between love and the law and the

third is an exhortation to holy living based on the nearness of the end of the age. So, we have three well defined subjects to consider this evening and they are tied together by the overall theme of the life that flows from the gospel.

So first our calling to submit to the civil government. The Christian life involves living together as members of the body of Christ and serving the body. It involves suffering because of our association with Jesus Christ and like him, loving our enemies and not retaliating when we are wronged. But it also involves living as members of the state and being obedient and contributing citizens.

Now there are at least two reasons why it was necessary for Paul to explicitly teach that Christians are to be subject to the governing authorities. One reason is to clear up any misunderstanding that Christians might have about the implications of being set free from the law. As we have worked our way through Romans we have been reminded of the importance of the concept of law for our understanding of the gospel and our relationship with God. And one of the things that we have learned is that Christians have been set free from the law in some sense. In chapter 6:14, Paul says that believers are “not under law but under grace.” And in chapter 7:1-6, Paul teaches that believers are dead to the law and that we have been released from the law.

What Paul means by these phrases is that we are free from the condemnation of the law because we are forgiven through Christ and right with God through what Christ has done for us. Paul uses these phrases in a very specific way, and he can easily be misunderstood. Indeed, he has often been misunderstood. One way to misunderstand what he is saying is to think that we are free from the civil law and are no longer subject to civil authorities.

Another reason that Christians might think that they are not subject to civil government is that Jesus Christ is their LORD. Jesus is the highest authority. Some of the imagery of the gospel is political imagery such as kingdom and heavenly citizenship. And so, some Christians might draw the conclusion that if they belong to the kingdom of God, they do not have to obey earthly rulers.

In the first part of Romans 13, Paul makes it clear that being under the Lordship of Christ does not free us from the authority of the governing authorities. Christ is indeed our highest authority and as the example of Peter and John in Acts 5 teaches us, if there is a conflict between what God tells us to do and what government officials tell us to do, “We must obey God rather than men.” But Romans 13 teaches us that even though Christ is our highest authority and our highest alliance is to the kingdom of God, we are still citizens of some earthly realm and we are to be obedient citizens of the governing authorities of that realm.

Verse 1, “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.” Authority is very important in God’s world. In our day and age, and I suppose in every age, people tend to feel negatively about being under someone else’s authority. Indeed, it is part of our sinful human nature to chafe at authority over us and to want to go our own way and do our own thing. But human beings are designed to thrive by being submissive to the authorities that God has placed over them. True freedom, as the Bible teaches it, is voluntarily submitting to legitimate authority over us. The authority that Paul is concerned about in this passage is the authority of the civil government. It comes from God.

Verses 2-5 teach that to resist legitimate governing authority is to resist God. Paul even calls the governing authorities God’s servants. And we must remember that the government in Paul’s day was the Roman Empire. The governing authorities certainly did not think of themselves as God’s servants. But they were - even though they did not realize it. They were God’s servants because God in his providence had placed them in their positions of authority and because God had ordained that human societies should be governed. This is no less the case today when we are governed by a government which clearly does not consider itself to be God’s servants. The powers that be, for the most part, do not take the word and law of God seriously, but nevertheless they are God’s servants because he has placed them in their positions of authority and the authority that they wield ultimately comes from him. And so, for us, we are to submit to their authority because we submit to the God who has given it to them.

These verses also teach us one of the key reasons that God has given authority to governing officials. God's main task for government is to punish evil-doers – to maintain law and order. Verses 3-4, "For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer."

This is pretty straight forward. The government has authority from God to punish evil doers. When they are doing that God is acting through them. "For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer."

Now it is tempting to discuss a variety of questions that this passage raises. It is a very important passage in Scripture concerning God and civil government. But I want just to highlight what the text highlights. The purpose of this passage in its own context is to exhort Christians to submit to their civil governments. Verse 5 gives the application that Paul is making. "Therefore, one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience." And being in subjection also includes paying taxes and showing respect to government officials. Verses 6-7, "For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God attending to this very thing. Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed." We are to do this not just to stay out of trouble, but also because it is part of what God requires of us. One of the results of the grace of God in the gospel in our lives is that it changes out attitudes towards civil governments. Submission, taxes and respect. This is what God requires of us. This is belongs to the life that flows from the gospel.

We must move on. The next section is a general exhortation to love. Paul as a writer had a tendency to go off on tangents. This is not a good thing according to today's style of writing, but we can be grateful that Paul was not governed by today's style of writing because these tangents are some of the most devotional parts of his writing. Often,

they deal with some aspect of the glory of God or of Christ and they are wonderful. These next two sections seem to be a couple of points that just occurred to Paul as he was writing. Their relationship to the whole is that they address the life of sacrifice that flows from the gospel, but there is no real reason for Paul to mention these things at this point. These are just two points that Paul wanted to stress as he was expounding the Christian life.

Verses 8-10 deal with love. Paul had already spoken about love, but now he brings it up again and no doubt the reason he does so is because it is so important and central to the Christian life. “Owe no one anything, except to love each other.” It seems that this idea occurred to Paul when he was speaking about paying taxes and showing honor and respect to whom they are owed. And so, he says, “Owe no one anything, except to love each other....”

We are not to “Owe no one anything.” We do that by meeting our obligations – whether it is taxes or showing honor to whom honor is owed. Clearly, he is using the idea of “owing” in a very comprehensive and general way. Usually we think of owing in terms of owing money. And that is included in what Paul means here, but no doubt he is thinking more broadly. We are to pay our debts whether those are financial or other kinds of obligations that we have to other people. We are obligated to fulfill commitments that we have made. We are obligated to fulfill our responsibilities to our wives or husbands or children. We are obligated to contribute significantly to the life of the church. We are obligated to show up for work on time. There are lots of obligations in life and one of the fruits of the gospel in our lives will be that we will fulfill our obligations the best we can because we love God and want to please him.

But then Paul mentions an exception. “Owe no one anything, except to love each other.” We are to embrace the obligation to love each other and that is an ongoing obligation. We never come to the point where that obligation is “paid in full.” We never come to the point where we are not obligated to love each other. It is not the kind of obligation that we can ever fully satisfy.

Now this talk of owing and obligation can feel onerous. But we must understand this in the light of the gospel and the biblical teaching on the way of joy and satisfaction. The transformation that is the result of salvation in Christ, is **from** a life that is empty and self-centered **to** a life that is full and other-centered. The way of life that is concerned only with self is the way of death and being truly alive and joyful according to the Bible is to learn to sacrifice for God and others. Remember the opening line of this section. We are to present our bodies as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God. That is not a bad thing. That is not a punishment. It is rather what it means to be truly alive. It is life as it was meant to be lived. It is the way of joy and satisfaction. It is a huge part of what salvation means.

And so, this idea of living with the ongoing obligation to love each other belongs to the way of life. Jesus died and rose again so that we might receive the gift of the inner desire to be like Jesus and live lives of sacrifice for others. So. The talk of always feeling the obligation to love each other is not onerous in the context of the gospel. It is what the gospel frees us to do.

But we still need the exhortation. Paul feels the need to exhort us to love each other and to repeat that exhortation, not only because it is super important, but also because he knows that being saved does not mean that we are immediately perfect. Being saved means that our hearts are changed, but it does not mean that we are completely finished with sin. We still have sinful natures. We still have a tendency to be selfish. We still need to be reminded and exhorted to love one another.

And so, let us ponder this exhortation with respect to our own lives and seek to obey it with enthusiasm. It is part of the good news of salvation. It is part of what salvation means.

The rest of this middle section of this chapter has to do with the relationship between love and the law and it is very important for our understanding of the role of the law in the Christian life. I have already mentioned that the law is very important for understanding the gospel and our relationship with God. I also mentioned that there is a sense in which we are free from the law. We are free from the law in the sense

that it no longer condemns us if we are followers of Jesus Christ. But now Paul tells us to fulfill the law by loving one another.

You see, in order to understand the role of the law in our lives as Christians we need to look at all the passages in which Paul uses that term. Paul uses that term quite a few different ways and we need to think carefully about each way that he uses it. From this passage it is clear that the law still has an important role to play in the lives of believers. In one sense they are free from it, but in another sense the gospel sets us free to keep it. Here Paul speaks of love as the fulfillment of the law. “[T]he one who loves another has fulfilled the law.” Clearly fulfilling the law means keeping it or obeying it. Paul is telling us to love each other and he says that if we do so we are fulfilling the law. Fulfilling involves keeping the law. That is what salvation frees us to do.

It means more than that however. The idea of fulfilling the law here is the idea of realizing the intention or purpose of the law. The law of God is given to steer us in the way of love. Love is at the heart of the law – love to God and love to our fellow man. And so, when we love we fulfill the law.

This passage is important for the Reformed conviction that the Ten Commandments are still binding upon Christians today. For Paul here quotes a number of the Ten Commandments and he clearly considers them to be binding upon Christians. They are binding in the sense that they express God’s will for our lives. They are binding in the sense that we are required to keep them. They are not binding in the sense that we must keep them in order to be right with God, but they are binding in the sense that one of the key goals of salvation is that we might voluntarily and joyfully keep them.

Now it is true that Paul does not mention all of the Ten Commandments here, but he does quote a number of them that have to do with love for our neighbor. But as believers who are heirs of the Reformed tradition, we take this passage along with a number of others and conclude that the authors of the New Testament considered the Ten Commandments to be binding upon Christians. This is part of the Reformed tendency to emphasize the continuity between Old Testament and New Testament

and most of us who study the word of God are confirmed again and again in this conviction.

So love is the fulfilling of the law. Jesus came to set us free from the law, but he also came so that we would be set free from the bondage of sin and so learn to love God's law and want to keep it. The law no longer condemns us, so we are free from it in that sense. But the new hearts that God gives us are hearts that love God's law because we love God and so we want to keep the law and so reflect the character of God in our lives. The key is to understand the law and our relationship to it in the light of the gospel. Legalism is bad. Keeping the law because we love God is good.

Finally, Paul makes another point and this one has to do with the urgency of living the Christian life in the light of imminent return of the Lord Jesus. This is how Paul expresses this point. Verses 11-12, "Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light." He spells out what this means in verses 13, 14, "Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires."

Now this sense of urgency is interesting in the light of other things that Paul says about those who are saved. We have Romans 5:1 which says, "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." We have Romans 8:23 which says, "we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we eagerly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons." In these verses and many others like them there is a sense of confidence in our relationship with God and an eager expectation of the return of Christ and the completion of our salvation.

So, this note of urgency and warning is interesting and important for our understanding of the Christian life. On the one hand there is a wonderful security. Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ. On the other hand there is real danger of not actually being saved



when we think that we are. Listen to how Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 9:24 & 27. “Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So, run that you may obtain it.... But, I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.” So, on the one hand there is security and on the other hand there is danger of not actually being truly saved.

Those are both biblical emphases and we must take them both into account. No doubt at one point one or the other will be more in the foreground, but they are both part of Christian experience.

So, in this last section of Paul sounds the note of warning – Christ is coming soon and so be sure to be repenting of sin and striving for obedience and holiness. And he even warns about such things as orgies and drunkenness and sexual immorality and sensuality. He gives this warning to the same people that in Romans 6 he had told that they were dead to sin and alive to God.

There are a lot of warnings in the Bible about being watchful and being ready for the return of the Lord. Jesus addresses this a number of times. One passage that sums up clearly the attitude that we must have is Matthew 24:45–50, <sup>45</sup>“Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his master has set over his household, to give them their food at the proper time? <sup>46</sup>Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes. <sup>47</sup>Truly, I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions. <sup>48</sup>But if that wicked servant says to himself, ‘My master is delayed,’ <sup>49</sup>and begins to beat his fellow servants and eats and drinks with drunkards, <sup>50</sup>the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know <sup>51</sup>and will cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

We are to live in the light of the fact that Jesus Christ could return at any moment. There are people who think that all is well with their souls when all is not well with their souls. And the way to tell if all is well with our souls is if we are taking seriously the fight of faith and we are engaged in the struggle for holiness and obedience and spiritual growth. It is not unnecessary to warn confessing Christians against orgies and drunkenness and sexual immorality and sensuality. These things do

happen among confessing Christians and woe to that person who is living like that when Jesus returns.

There is a seriousness about life including the Christian life. There is security for those who are trusting and obeying, but none of us are trusting and obeying as we should and all of us are in danger of complacency and coasting and drifting and even falling away. And this is the side that Paul is emphasizing in these verses. “The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.... [P]ut on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.”

Let us take this warning to heart. Let us live with the awareness of the fact that Jesus can return at any moment and he himself and through his apostles have given us many warnings about being watchful and being ready. If we are living in sin, we are in great danger. If we are not serious about putting off sin and putting on Jesus, we are in great danger. The way to be ready is to be engaged – to be active in serving the Lord and seeking to become more like him. There are many comforting passages in Scripture and they are very precious, but there are passages in which God intends to shake us up and to wake us up and let us take those seriously as well.