

Romans: The Good News of God

The Christian Citizen

Romans 13:1-14

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Scripture

Today we continue our study in Romans. Let's read Romans 13:1-14:

¹Let 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. ²Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. ³For 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, ⁴for 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. ⁵Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. ⁶For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. ⁷Pay 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.

⁸Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. ⁹For the commandments, "You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet," and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." ¹⁰Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.

¹¹Besides 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. ¹²The 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. ¹³Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. ¹⁴But put on the

Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires. (Romans 13:1-14)

Introduction

The careful and attentive reader of the Epistle to the Romans notices something of a tension between the opening and closing words of the apostle Paul in the thirteenth chapter of this letter.

In Romans 13:1 he writes, “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities,” while in verse 12 he exclaims, “The night (in the context a reference to the present age) is far gone; the day is at hand.”

Speaking of this Walter Luthi writes,

This brings to my mind a certain house on the road from Adelboden to Frutigen; from some distance away you can see written on it in bold letters: “Time flies, the end is near; soon the Lord shall appear. Hallelujah!” but strangely enough the house and the rhyme have been newly painted. Evidently the owner is expecting the return of Christ and is waiting for the end, and yet—how illogical and inconsistent!—instead of letting his house fall to pieces, he keeps it in immaculate order and even gives it a new coat of paint. But that is in keeping with God’s logic and it is just what the apostle means when he speaks of “reasonable worship” (12:1). The divine logic that paints a perishable house afresh although “the day is at hand” becomes strikingly evident in this thirteenth chapter of the Letter to the Romans. To put it in a nutshell, we can say that the apostle might have lived in the house between Adelboden and Frutigen.

There is a problem here, if we remember Paul’s words in Romans 12:2, “Do not be conformed to this world [literally, “age”].” If we are not to be conformed to this age, should we, then, pay our income taxes to the Internal Revenue Service? Should we vote? Did not Paul write that we were citizens of another land? What does he mean in Philippians 3:20, where he said, “But our citizenship is in heaven”? And did not the writer of the Epistle to

the Hebrews say much the same thing in Hebrews 12:22, “But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem”?

It may be helpful to remember that Christians live in many spheres of existence. *In the first place, there is the personal sphere*, that sphere of life encompassed by the Lord and the Christian only. In this sphere we are to live according to the *preceptive* will of God, which are the commands of God expressed in the word of God. Here it is a matter of submission to the Lord in view of the fact that one day we must appear before the judgment seat of Jesus Christ and give an account of our lives and service.

In the second place, the Christian lives in a family, and in this sphere we are responsible for obedience to the things the Scriptures have to say regarding family life. The husband is the head of the wife and is to render to her the love that Christ had and has for the church, while the wife is to be in submission to her husband. Children are to obey their parents in the Lord.

In the third place, the Christian lives in the church, in the sense that we are members of the body of those who have come by grace to faith in Christ. In this sphere of life we are responsible to be in submission to the elders of the church, who have the rule over us (cf. Hebrews 13:7, 17, 24). To imitate their faith and obey them is our duty, and we shall be held responsible for these things.

Lesson

And, finally, we live in the sphere of the state. In the state we have certain responsibilities, too, and it is of these that Paul writes in Romans 13. This is not the only chapter in which he speaks on these things, but it is probably the most important of them. And it is to this normative chapter that we now turn.

I. Public Obligations to the State (13:1-7)

First, we have public obligations to the State.

Paul commands all people in Romans 13:1a: **“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities.”** Specifically, Paul calls upon all Christians in Rome to be obey their **governing authorities**.

Paul gives several reasons for submission to the governing authorities. *The first is that the governing authorities have been ordained by God.* Paul says in Romans 13:1b: **“For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.”**

Government is, therefore, the product of the divine will and, as R. A. Torrey, I believe, once said, “Even bad government is better than no government.” Countries that have no functioning government experience total chaos.

Second, the apostle points out in verses 3-6 that the governing authorities approve that which is right and punish that which is wrong. Paul says, **“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. Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God’s wrath but also for the sake of conscience. For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing”** (13:3-6).

The sentiment is the same as that given by Peter (cf. 1 Peter 2:14). What a stern sequence there is in the passage. In it we move from authority through law and justice to the sword. The mention of the sword seems to imply that ultimate authority, the authority over physical life, has been delegated to the higher powers. In other words, capital punishment finds divine justification from this passage.

The apostle concludes with, **“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 hon-**

or is owed” (Romans 13:7). Our political leaders are to have our submission.

David’s words to Abishai, when they had King Saul in their hands, illustrate the principle that Paul is propounding. David and Abishai were in the camp of King Saul one night. Saul was sleeping, and Abishai wanted to kill Saul, but David said to Abishai, “Do not destroy him, for who can put out his hand against the Lord’s anointed and be guiltless?” (1 Samuel 26:9).

Jesus’ words to the chief priests, the scribes, and others also point to the principle for which Paul is arguing. When they asked, “Is it right for us to pay taxes to Caesar *or* not?” Jesus replied, using a visual aid of a denarius, “Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, *and* to God the things that are God’s” (cf. Luke 20:19-26). In the difference of the two conjunctions, “*or*” (v. 22) and “*and*” (v. 25) we have the essence of Jesus’ viewpoint.

It is not a matter of “*either/or*,” but of “*both/and*,” when we are speaking of submission to the human authorities and to the Divine Authority. We are to give obedience to both.

But, someone asks, “Suppose my party lost the election. Am I to yield obedience to the leader of the opposite party who won?” Well, yes, if he is the one who holds public office, then we must render to him submission.

Then another asks, “Are we to render obedience, if the government of the land is despotic and violates the will of God, as expressed in the Scriptures?” In the matters in which there is a clear violation of the principles of the word of God we are to resist.

The apostles followed this path, as the Acts indicates (cf. Acts 4:17-21; 5:29, 40-42). When told that they were not to preach the gospel, the apostles continued doing just that, following the higher principle, “We must obey God rather than men.” We can do nothing better (cf. Daniel 3:16-18).

In other words, God is the one who raises up leaders to rule over people. So long as those leaders are not directly violating God’s word, the people are to obey their leaders. However, if the leaders promote laws that violate God’s law, then the people must

not obey those laws. However, having said that, we should also be aware that the people may then be subject to suffering the consequences of their obedience to God and disobedience to the State.

II. Private Obligations within the State (13:8-10)

Second, we have private obligations within the State.

The negative side of things is taken up first, with Paul writing, **“Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law”** (Romans 13:8).

John Murray comments in this way:

The force of the imperative is that we are to have no unpaid debts; that we are not to be in debt to any. In accord with the analogy of Scripture this cannot be taken to mean that we may never incur financial obligations, that we may not borrow from others in case of need (cf. Exodus 22:25; Psalm 37:26; Matthew 5:42; Luke 6:35). But it does condemn the looseness with which we contract debts and particularly the indifference so often displayed in the discharging of them. “The wicked borroweth, and payeth not again” (Psalm 37:21). Few things bring greater reproach upon the Christian profession than the accumulation of debts and refusal to pay them.

That reminds me of a story told by Griffith Thomas, “A man who owed a Christian brother some money once was heard to pray in a meeting, ‘Lord, give us faith, give us devil-driving faith.’ The brother to whom the money was owed said to himself quietly, ‘Amen, Lord, and give us debt-paying faith.’”

In our current economic situation I know that a growing number of our church family are struggling financially. Some of you have lost jobs or income. If you find yourself struggling financially, please talk to one of our Deacons. We have a Benevolence Fund which is designed to help people who have financial need. Don’t ignore your financial difficulty; talk to someone so that we

can support you in your time of need.

In verses 8-10 Paul argues that love is the fulfillment of the Law of Moses.

All the particular statutes of the Decalogue, insofar as they relate to obligations to one another, are summed up in the command, **“You shall love your neighbor as yourself”** (13:9). The commands of the second table are referred to because they pertain to our relations with one another.

In verse 10 Paul writes in the negative form, **“Love does no wrong to a neighbor,”** but the positive is implied, or “Love doeth good,” as theologian W. G. T. Shedd says.

III. Personal Eschatological Incentive to Their Fulfillment (13:11-14)

Third, Paul talks about personal eschatological incentive to their fulfillment.

In verse 11 Paul introduces an incentive to the fulfillment of the obligations laid by God upon Christians by referring to the fact that the time for the close of the age is drawing near. He says, **“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”** (Romans 13:11).

The apostle refers to the present time as the **“night”** in verse 12 and, therefore, it is high time that we awake from sleep. **Our salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed.**

The exhortation is for drowsy believers, who are allowing opportunities to slip by. He refers to the wasted opportunities of Christian service that come to all of us.

The sleep out of which they are to awake is the sleep of selfishness, the doctrinal sleep of those who refuse to see the importance of the theology of the Scriptures, and the spiritual somnambulists who are so numerous in our evangelical churches. They are outwardly walking and alive, often teaching, praying, and reading in the assemblies of the saints, but inwardly they are asleep. Paul

says it is high time that they awake.

The exhortation is grounded in the fact that we are nearer the conclusion of our race and fight of faith than we were when we became Christians. It is possible that Paul is referring to the Second Advent of Christ.

The apostle and others in the New Testament refer to salvation in three tenses. It often appears in the past tense, and in such cases it refers to our salvation from the *penalty* of sin, given at conversion through repentance and faith (cf. Ephesians 2:8).

And, second, the word salvation is used of our present salvation, being accomplished by the Spirit of God, in which we are being delivered from the *power* of sin in our lives (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:18, etc.). In this usage it is equivalent to the progressive sanctification of the believer.

And, finally, it is used of the future salvation from the *presence* of sin, that is, when we pass into the presence of the Lord at his advent. It is used in this sense here (cf. 5:9).

Three exhortations follow in the light of the fact that the day is at hand. *In the first place, we are to cast off the works of darkness, the works that characterized the old life* (cf. Ephesians 4:17-19, 22-24). Paul said in Romans 13:12b, **“So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.”**

In the second place, the armor of light is to be put on, a reference to the holy life proper for believers. Paul said in Romans 13:12c, **“So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.”** The fact that the apostle speaks of “armor” may suggest that he has the Roman soldier in mind, who after his day’s work put aside his armor to carouse through the night and then put it on again in the morning to return to his work. Paul had seen many of them in his time, often having first-hand contact with them, for they were assigned to guard him. Thus, the putting aside was of the dirty armor, while the putting on was the putting on of the armor, after it had been cleaned from the dirt.

In the third place, Paul calls upon the believers to walk decently in holiness, not in immorality. Paul said in Romans 13:13,

“Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy.” This is the verse that Augustine’s eyes fell upon when he opened the apostle’s letter in response to the children who were shouting, *“Tolle, lege; tolle, lege,”* or, “Take it, read it; take it, read it.” By this experience the great rhetorician came to the Christian faith.

The conclusion to the chapter follows in verse 14, **“But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.”**

Paul’s words, of course, were addressed to those who were already believers, for Christ must be in us before he can be on us. The words **“put on”** is aorist in tense and refers to a definite, positive act.

And the name used of our Lord here suggests various aspects of his person and work. He is the Lord and all the faculties belong to him. And he is Jesus, the savior and sanctifier and preserver from sin. And he is Christ, the Messiah, the prophet who teaches, the priest who has offered the offering by which we enter the veil of divine communion, and the king under whose sway is everything.

The clothes of the works of darkness are to be put off, and the clothes of the Lord himself are to be put on, and these are the clothes that really do make the man. The details are spelled out in Colossians 3:12-17, where we read:

¹²Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, ¹³bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. ¹⁶Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. ¹⁷And whatever you do, in word or deed, do every-

thing in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

The negative action concludes the chapter. Paul says, “**And make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires**” (13:14b). The tense of the verb here is instructive. It is a present middle, and it refers to continual action of not stirring up the remainders of the flesh that abide in all believers (cf. 7:1-8:39).

Conclusion

Submission to the kingdoms of this world is to be carried out against the background of hope, the hope of the return of the Lord. The kingdoms come and go (cf. Daniel 2:21), but *the* kingdom, when it comes, shall abide. Lords come and go, too, but *the* Lord shall come and, when he does, the lords shall go forever.

I have not been speaking to the unbeliever in this message, although there have been things applicable to the unbeliever in it. If I were to apply the text to the unbeliever, it might be done in this way. Let me read verse 11 to that end. Instead of saying, “Because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed,” it could be said, “It is high time that you should awake out of sleep, for now is your damnation nearer than when you first heard the gospel and rejected it.”

Oh my friend, take heed to the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, who offered the atoning sacrifice in his blood, by which you might be saved. Flee to the cross in the grace that God supplies and lean upon him and his work for time and for eternity. May God enable you to do it. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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PRAAYER:

This prayer is taken from Ray Ortlund's *A Passion for God*:

Our God and King, you love order. You have undertaken to establish order, both in the universe and here on earth in human society. But we find in our hearts an anarchic impulse, an autonomous conceit, defiant even of legitimate authority. We resent all limitation imposed upon us. Our egos cannot endure that there is something superior in this universe to Self. We see this most vividly in relation to you, but also in relation to those lower authorities you have established over us, including human government. Your orderly ranking of powers over us can feel more like a crushing burden than a benevolent positioning of us where we can flourish without destroying others or ourselves. We confess our seditious spirits. We confess that you are supreme and we are not. We surrender to the order you have structure for us. Teach us what it means to be a Christian here within this network of earthly obligations. Let us keep our conscience clear before you, both by obeying the state with an ungrudging deference when its demands are lawful and by defying the state with a holy detachment when its demands are idolatrous. O God, let your church in this generation be so fully surrendered to you that we rise above both compromise and fanaticism. Keep vividly before us your promise of the new earth, where alone righteousness dwells.

And all of this we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

CHARGE:

As you leave here today, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.