

Study 15: Romans Chapter 13

Introduction

In this chapter, - like no other chapter in the New Testament – our responsibilities towards civil governments are outlined for us.

Body of the Study

Why should we obey the government?

How do rulers hold terror to evil?

What are the practical applications of this?

What type of restraint does God want the christian to have?

What do we need to do about all of this?

Homework and preparation for next week:

- *If a government uses taxes for immoral purposes, should we withhold our taxes? Why or why not?*
- *How does God view people who do not pay their honest debts?*

- Read the notes as a review of the study.
- Read chapter 14 in preparation for the next study.

Notes for study 15: Chapter 13

Introduction

In this chapter, - like no other chapter in the New Testament – our responsibilities towards civil governments are outlined for us.

Some have argued that all earthly governments are corrupt, and therefore the only responsibilities that we have are towards God. Consequently we should not do anything to help the earthly governments.

But that is not what Paul says – in fact, quite the opposite.

Body of the Study

Why should we obey the government?

The clear answer that Paul gives for this is the fact that God is in control – and even if we don't like the government, God has appointed them.

This raises some interesting questions. Does God actually “appoint” them – ie take positive action to have them put in place, or *allow* them to be appointed? The NIV renders it:

RO 13:1 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. (NIV)

We are not told *how* God establishes the authority. There are many cases in the Old Testament where God has seen to it that corrupt leaders were put in place and He then used them to bring vengeance against His own people.

We need to take careful note of what Paul actually says here. He doesn't say ***obey*** the governing powers, but rather that we ***submit to them***. We need to show them our subordinate position. There may in fact be things that we *shouldn't* obey. But even despite that we can still be submissive.

Rulers come into power either by power through force, or by heredity, or by popular choice¹.

The message that Paul brings us is that it is God who is in control. There is always a tendency to say that we are subject to God, and not to the mere human powers. But the clear message that Paul gives is that we are to be submissive to those in authority. In the context of the first century church, Claudius had already decreed that the Jews were to leave Rome (Acts 18:2), but they later were allowed to return. The Jews rebelled against the Romans, and it caused the Romans to retaliate against them. Paul is strongly saying that we ought not to do that. Christianity is about making peace. Peter brought out the sword, and Jesus told him to put it away (Mt 26:51-52).

It is hard for us to think how Hitler and his regime could be established by God. But we need to remember the examples in the Old Testament, and that God is concerned about our eternal spiritual welfare. We think in humanistic terms and think of our physical welfare, and wonder why there is suffering on the earth. We don't have all of the answers, but God sees things a lot clearer and differently than we do.

Paul next moves towards a negative aspect of the point that he has just made. There is a consequence for not being submissive. By resisting the authority, we are resisting the ordinance of God and we will face the consequences of His judgement.

¹ Moo, Douglas: New International Commentary on the New Testament; Romans p 798. William B Eerdemans, Grand Rapids Michigan. ISBN 0-8028-2317-3

We firstly need to put this into the context of the Roman church. The Jewish sect of the Zealots wanted to get rid of the Romans who were ruling Jerusalem, and get back to rule by the Jews themselves. They continually needled the Romans and despised their rule and authority. The consequences were that the Romans then reacted and rose up against the Jews in the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 68 through AD 70. Paul writes the Roman letter in AD 57/58 and no doubt the signs of the rebellion against the Romans was beginning to show. Further, the church in Rome were in intimate contact with the Roman leaders.

There is a saying that *the people end up with the type of government that they deserve*. If the people tolerate corruption, they will tolerate it in the government. If they tolerate (and practice) immorality, they will elect a government that allows it. God can (and has) used such to accomplish His own ends in the destruction of those who support the immorality & corruption. *Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people* – Prov 14:34

How do rulers hold terror to evil?

All governing authorities (well most of them – we could say “all” in a generic manner) want order in the society. They want the citizens to be well behaved, live at peace, and be happy. To control the society they bring about laws to regulate what people do.

If there was no speed limit (there isn't one as far as I know between Darwin & Alice Springs), we could drive at 300 km per hour (if our cars could go that fast). It might not result in our good, and if we hit a kangaroo or a cow it would be the end of us. It would also put other people in danger. If we were sensible, we would drive at around 120 km per hour if the road conditions allowed us to do it safely. If everyone did that, there would be no problem and the government wouldn't need to do anything. Unfortunately there are some silly people who insist on going as fast as they can without any thought or responsibility for other road users. In order to regulate what people can do, they are forced to bring in a speed limit. The point is, that the speed limit is not for those who are behaving themselves, it is for those who are *not* (otherwise) behaving themselves. But the *consequences* of the law apply to everyone, not just to those who cause the trouble.

So, Paul says that if we do what is good, then we need have no fear from the authorities. In fact, they will be pleased with your responsible actions and you will have their praise.

On the other hand, if we are rebellious and taunt the authorities, then they will be looking for opportunities to get back at us and bring us back into line. But Paul says that it goes further than that. The authorities are God's representatives. By doing evil, God might use them as His ministers to bring us back into line and receive His punishment.

As God's servants, we need to bear in mind that our conscience should dictate that we should do what God wants. To be rebellious is not consistent with who we are as His children.

What are the practical applications of this?

As Christians, we have a civic responsibility to behave in a submissive manner. We do have the right of choice at an election to vote for the government of our choice. Voting the government out is an orderly measure that we have. It is not what Paul is talking about here. It is not an act of rebellion.

But if we are at the forefront of civil unrest and uprising, then that is exactly what Paul is talking about. There are some organisations (for example Greenpeace) that will go to quite extraordinary lengths to protest, rebel, and undo what the government has put into place.

We pay our taxes. We could rebel and refuse to pay our taxes. We could cheat on our tax return by not declaring all of our income, or overstating our expenses (or whatever). Paul reminds us of the civic responsibility that we have as service to the government – and through them as service to God, to pay what is due.

We should live in such a way as to owe nothing to anyone. The only debt that we should have is that of love to one another. This doesn't mean that we shouldn't put ourselves in financial debt (by borrowing money to buy a house or a car). What it means is that we should pay the debt when it is due. In an extreme example (to illustrate the point) if we were filling our car up with petrol, we would not be expected to go in to the cashier and pay the bill after every 1\$ that we had put in the tank so that we didn't owe anything to anyone. The fuel bill isn't due until we have finished filling the tank. And we do have the responsibility to pay the bill when it is due.

What type of restraint does God want the christian to have?

From the examples that Paul gives, he clearly has moral and social considerations in mind. He tells us to love (*agape* love) for one another. We all have this type of moral obligation, and we can never escape it. He builds on this further by bringing out some of the moral aspects of the Law – the aspects that relate to fellow citizens. (Some of the aspects of the Law deal with how we relate to God, with 4 of the commandments directed to our relationship with God, and 6 towards our relationship with our fellow man):

- Do not commit adultery
- Do not murder
- Do not steal
- Do not bear false witness
- Do not covet

He sums it up in the brief statement “...*if there is any other commandment it is summarised by loving your neighbour as yourself...*” (13:9)

Clearly, the restraint that God wants us to have is one of submission – but not one of *grudging* submission!!! He wants us to *behave* in a way that is fitting – not just doing what we have to do, but because it fits in with the sense of character that we have – a character directed in submission and service not only to God, but also towards our fellow man. When we extend that attitude towards the rulers and authorities, *then* we will fulfil who God wants us to be in our society.

Love does not harm our neighbours, for love is the fulfilment of the law (13:10)

What do we need to do about all of this?

Paul doesn't leave us (or the Romans) wondering about what to do next. He says that it is high time to get up and get active. He says “...*knowing the time...*” (which is not saying that we know the time of Christ's return, or anything similar), but rather that we should be aware of the short time that we have on this earth. We need to make the most of the limited opportunities that we have. We are now closer to our salvation than at any other time in our lives. Paul says that we need to get on with the job.

He draws a contrast between sin and life (the Romans letter is full of such contrasts). The night has gone – it is time to arise and get going. We need to cast off the works of darkness (the works of sin) and put on the armour of light (the armour of Christ).

The contrasts continue. We should not walk with the type of behaviour exhibited by people who are active in the night – (by implication, robbers), revellers (those seeking wanton and unrestrained behaviour), drunkenness, licentiousness (sexual immorality), lewdness (excess and lazy reckless behaviour). Further, not in strife and envy.

The type of slothful and immoral behaviour that Paul is describing is obvious, and can be seen around us. That is not who we are called to be as God's people.

Paul sums it up succinctly in the last verse:

But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts.(13:14 NKJV)