



THE BOOK OF ROMANS

13:1-7

**Submitting to Earthly
Authorities**

Romans

13:1-7



Introduction

After writing 12:14-21, St. Paul now takes up the topic found Romans 13:1-7 almost out of necessity. If Christians do not take action against those who harm them, but instead bless them and seeks peace with them (12:14, 17-18), will chaos result? When Paul commands us to give a **“place”** for the eschatological wrath of God to be at work (12:19), where is that place?

Paul will now engage in describing the primary manner in which God’s vengeance and wrath are currently at work against those who do evil in this temporal world. This becomes quite unmistakable in 13:4, where **“wrath”** and **“vengeance,”** as found in 12:19, reappear. We will see that one way that God’s **“wrath”** and **“vengeance”** is enacted is through earthly authorities (13:1). Our Lutheran confessors wrote in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession:

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13:1-7



“Thus private revenge is forbidden not [only] as an [evangelical] counsel but as a command (Matt. 5:39; Rom 12:19). Public redress through a judge is not forbidden but expressly commanded, and it is a work of God according to Paul (Rom 13:1ff).”
[Ap XVI 7]

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Using God's Word as our guide, there are many other exhortations to His children concerning obedience to civil authorities: 1Tim.2:1-3; Titus 3:1; 1Peter 2:13-17; Proverbs 8:15; Jeremiah 29:7; Daniel 2:21, 37-38. Many of the early Christians were Jews, and Jews were reluctant to be ruled by foreign authorities. So Paul appears to be addressing this concern here. The Holy Spirit says through Paul that God is in control and nobody secures a position of ruler-ship unless God permits. The servants of God must, accordingly, submit to its laws. Paul regards rulers not as autonomous, but as ***"established by God."*** The ruler is ***"God's servant"*** (v.4).

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This gives the ruler a special dignity; yet, at the same time, stresses his position as subordinate to God. He is to do, not whatever He wishes, but the will of God as God has revealed it. So then, we can see that Rom 13:1-7 is a general statement determined primarily by the flow of the letter and this is the most plausible explanation for Paul's content. The previous section of 12:14-21 demonstrates the function of 13:1-7 in relation to context.

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Introduction

Paul addresses four topics, revealing basic questions with which the early Christians may [must] have struggled.

First, God is the source of authority that is exercised by human government (13:2). This is a further expression of the truth found in the commandment, *“Honor your father and your mother.”* By respecting our parents, and others who are placed in authority, we show our respect for God, who has placed these people and institutions over us for our good.

Second, authorities are God’s servants for your good (13:3). God has given authority to government for the good of citizens. Obviously, such authority can be and has been abused throughout history; in such cases, a government is not acting as God’s servant.

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Third, as God's servant, government—not vigilantes—punish evildoers (13:4). This text supports a criminal justice system that includes capital punishment, although there have been many Christians who have argued otherwise.

Fourth, we are to be subject or obedient to governing authorities, including the payment of our taxes (13:2-7). Human authority is never superior to God's commands. ***“We must obey God rather than men”*** (Acts 5:29) guides us in those situations where obedience to government conflicts with our obedience to God!

Romans

13:1-4



Earthly
Authorities
&
Divine
Ordering

It's only an exaggeration to say that the history of the interpretation of our text this morning is a history of attempts to avoid what seems to be its plain meaning. In fact, by turning to the text, we find a coherent and very well-organized (remembering that the Holy Spirit inspired Paul to write so) argument about a single topic. The structure of vv.1-7 is as follows:

+ General Command (1a)

- *First reason (1b)*
- *Consequences (2)*
- *Second Reason (3-4)*

+ Reiteration (5)

+ Appeal to practice (6)

+ Specific Command (7)

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13:1a



Earthly
Authorities
&
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Ordering

¹*Let every person be subject to authorities who are in high positions.*

Paul begins by explicitly pointing out the all-inclusive nature of vv.1-3 by opening with “**every person.**”

While this phrase clearly indicates all believers, it also extends to beyond them to encompass all people.

Thus the words which follow can be used properly by God’s people in the public square to assert that those outside of the family of faith stand equally accountable for being “**subject to authorities who are in high positions.**”

Paul’s wording of this last phrase speaks more broadly of those authorities who are in “**high positions**” as all civil servants who are placed in authority. The list could be quite extensive; however, it’s important to remember who has placed them in this “**high position.**”

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13:1b



**Divine
Ordering**

For there is not an authority except by God, and the ones which exist have been ordered and remain in place by God.

Paul now gives answer! There are three implications of which we should be aware: **First**, government is not something that evolved simply because humans felt a need for it. No! God instituted government.

Therefore, **secondly**, all governing authorities have derived authority, rather than an inherent authority.

Third and last, Paul clearly acknowledges a higher authority from whom the ordering comes and by whom each and every one in authority has been put in place.

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13:1b



Divine
Ordering

For there is not an authority except by God, and the ones which exist *have been ordered* and remain in place by God.

The Greek verb that Paul uses is clear and authoritative: ***“have been ordered”*** (τεταγμέναι) – literally, ancient military language for “designating” “appointing” or “commissioning” a specific status, i.e., arranging (placing) in a deliberate, fixed order.

Here’s the bottom line: those who ***“have been ordered”*** in a place of authority stand dependent upon and responsible to God for the exercise of their authority...whether they believe it or not (cf. Dan 4:25; St. John 19:11)!

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13:2



Rebellion
has
Consequences!

²So then, the one who opposes the authority has stood against the ordinances of God, and the ones who stand against [God] will receive judgment for themselves.

Maybe it would be clearer to you if we would translate Paul's Greek into bad English: **Be subordinated...the authorities that exist have been ordained by God...(v.1). He who refuses to subordinate himself to the "man"...is resisting God's orders...(v.2). Therefore one must be subordinate oneself (v.5).**

Romans

13:2



Rebellion
has
Consequences!

²So then, the one who opposes the authority has stood against the ordinances of God, and the ones who stand against [God] will receive judgment for themselves.

Again, if one opposes or rebels against authorities, whom God has placed for good order and to punish the lawbreakers, will be judged by the ultimate authority, God, on Judgment Day. The eschatological language is quite clear; however, God will not wait until the Last Day for certain lawbreakers, since He does act in this temporal world through temporal authorities to punish the vile evildoer! Again, the ultimate retribution for such ongoing wickedness toward God will be judged...perfectly!

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13:3-4



The Dual Functions of Earthly Authorities

³For the rulers are not a [cause of] fear for [one doing] the good work, but for [one doing] evil. Do you then wish not to fear the authority? Do that which is good, and you will have praise from it.
⁴Indeed, he is God's servant to you for the good. But if you do evil, fear! For he is God's servant, an avenger for the wrath to the one who practices evil.

There is no doubt that Paul begins by talking about earthly rulers. The early church father, John Chrysostom wrote: *"...that there should be rulers and ruled and that things should not just lapse into anarchy, with the people swaying like waves."*¹

¹Chysostom, *Homilies on Romans*, 23 (Bray, *Romans*, ACCS NT 6:325)

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13:3-4



The Dual Functions of Earthly Authorities

³For the rulers are not a [cause of] fear for [one doing] *the good work*, but for [one doing] evil. Do you then wish not to fear the authority? Do that which is good, and you will have praise from it.
⁴Indeed, he is God's servant to you for the good. But if you do evil, fear! For he is God's servant, an avenger for the wrath to the one who practices evil.

The person who does "*the good work*" should have no fear of earthly rulers; however, the lawbreaker, in keeping with the judgment envisioned in v.2, should fear the earthly ruler who has authority from God to judge and punish. This is the one function God expects anyone whom He places into authority to carry out.

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13:3-4



The Dual Functions of Earthly Authorities

Do you then wish not to fear the authority? Do that which is good, and you will have praise from it. ⁴Indeed, he is God's servant to you for the good. But if you do evil, fear! For he is God's servant, an avenger for the wrath to the one who practices evil.

In the second half of verse 3, Paul asks a *direct question!* Once again, those who do good should not need to fear the earthly ruler. And, it's important to point out, that God actually expects earthly rulers to actively praise those citizens who do good (who don't break the law or act wickedly).

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13:3-4



The Dual Functions of Earthly Authorities

⁴Indeed, he is *God's servant* to you for the good. But if you do evil, fear! For he is *God's servant*, an avenger for the wrath to the one who practices evil.

In v.4, St. Paul repeats much of the same thought in the previous verse. Yet, again, Paul does reiterate that God is the source of order and authority, as well as the One who puts individual rulers in place. Note that an earthly ruler is “***God's servant!***” As a servant of God they will be and are held to a standard and that standard is that they are to praise the doer of good and punish the doer of evil.

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13:3-4



What about
Capital
Punishment?

4Indeed, he is God's servant to you for the good. But if you do evil, fear! For he is God's servant, an avenger for the wrath to the one who practices evil.

The last sentence of v.4 uses language reserved for the Lord (cf. 12:19). Therefore, **"God's servant"** serves as the *"place"* for **"the wrath"** of God to be carried out. Is it not clear that the state, the earthly ruler, is thus charged with a function which has been explicitly forbidden to the Christian (12:17a, 19)?

This fits squarely, also, within OT understanding of the earthly authority (cf. 2 Ki 17; 24-25; Jeremiah 20-27; Ezekiel 24).

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13:5

Reasons for
Submitting

⁵Therefore, [it is] a **necessity** to be subject, not only on account of the wrath but also on account of the conscience.

In regard to “**necessity** [ἀνάγκη], Paul’s audience would be familiar with its use in Greek philosophy in reference to divine necessity—the way things are (laws of nature) and have to be (fate or destiny). Paul, therefore, appeals to this sense of Divine giving in a manner which should be acknowledged by many outside of the Christian community. He began in v.1 asserting that “every person” should “be subject.” How much more then should being subject characterize believers!

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13:5



Reasons for Submitting

⁵Therefore, [it is] a necessity to be subject, not only on account of the wrath but also on account of the conscience.

One reason to refrain from doing evil comes “on account of wrath,” which should be duly and appropriately inflicted in God’s behalf, through earthly rulers. This should provide a deterrent to correct behavior and prevent evil from happening. In fact, fear of punishment is only the minor reason for Christian submission, as Paul’s “**not only...but also**” sequence indicates. A more fundamental reason for Christian submission is “**on account of conscience.**” As Paul has already outlined in 2:15, he does not conceive that operation of the conscience as something distinctively Christian. Paul, therefore, appeals to the moral sensibility of the ancient world and, once again, Paul does not separate moral or spiritual obligation from civic responsibility and political reality.

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13:5



Reasons for Submitting

⁵Therefore, [it is] a necessity to be subject, not only on account of the wrath but also on account of the conscience.

Surely, a believer's conscience informed by the revealed Word has a prime advantage in this regard (cf. 3:1), and the active presence of the Holy Spirit further enlightens one's conscience. Augustine pointed out, *"...you [believers] should not submit simply to avoid the authority's anger, which can be done by pretense, but so that you might be assured in your conscience that you are doing this out of love for Him. For you submit at your Lord's command"*²

²Augustine, *Commentary on Statements in Romans*, 74 (Bray, *Romans*, ACCS NT 6:328).

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13:5



⁵Therefore, [it is] a necessity to be subject, not only *on account of the wrath* but also *on account of the conscience*.

Thus, the topic being discussed in vv.1-7, the conscience is also present and expected to perform an active role in all those without the revealed Word precisely because the work of the Law has been inscribed within their hearts (cf. 2:15).

Reasons for
Submitting

Romans

13:6



God's
Ministers

‘Indeed, on account of this you are also paying taxes. For they are *God’s ministers*, holding fast to this very thing.

The noun “**taxes**” (φόρους) encompasses all forms of revenue. It was not simply that taxation is the point of Paul’s discussion, though the state does rudely impinge on one’s daily life and income (then and today!). Instead, Paul views it as a response to the activity of “**God ministers.**” As they are devoted to carrying out their duties, those who receive the services outlined thus far respond appropriately to the ruler and, more importantly, to the One in whose service the minister is employed, by paying taxes (as Jesus instructed in St. Luke 20:22-25).

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13:6



God's
Ministers

‘Indeed, on account of this you are also paying taxes. For they are *God’s ministers*, holding fast to this very thing.

What does Paul mean by the use of **“*ministers*?”**

Last week, we discussed this Greek word in 12:1. It’s **λατρεία** and Paul is using a form of this word in a less common, but not unheard of way. The Greek noun that he uses is **λειτουργός** that refers to the rendering of public services to the body politic, traditionally the obligation which well-to-do citizens undertook for the benefit of the community. This noun is also used in Phil 2:5, Heb 1:2, 7; later, Paul will use this noun again, in 15:16, referring to himself. This is also true in our society today, (e.g., prime minister, minister of defense, etc.).

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13:7



Taxes, and
more, are
Due!

⁷Give back to all people the things that are owed: the tax to the one [owed] the tax, revenue to the one [owed] revenue, fear to the one [owed] fear, honor to the one [owed] honor.

Paul's final words in regard to governing authorities appear to draw a technical distinction between the first two terms as two kinds of taxation. The authorities demand taxes on our property and revenue from our business transactions. Jesus was obliged to pay taxes, not because He owed anything, so as not to cause scandal (Mt. 17:24-27). Paul then moves from taxation to attitude.

Romans

13:7



Taxes, and
more, are
Due!

⁷Give back to all people the things that are owned: the tax to the one [owed] the tax, revenue to the one [owed] revenue, fear to the one [owed] fear, honor to the one [owed] honor.

Christians across the spectrum have consistently failed in regard to giving appropriate “fear” and “honor.” Although, living in a democratically elected, representative government would seem to make it easier to submit to the authorities. Nevertheless, that which Paul commands believers in Rome to give to the Caesar and his administrators remains in place due to the divine offices held by those persons who serve in government and all other positions of authority.

NEXT SUNDAY



*Fulfilling the
Law of Love
until the
Dawning Day!
[13:8-14]*



Love does
no wrong to
a neighbor;
therefore
love is the
fulfilling of
the law.

Romans 13:10