

Governing Authorities
Romans 12:17 – 13:7

Turn to Romans 12 please. What about governing authorities? How do we think about them? How do we live with them? We've talked about that a few times in the last few years. And people have mentioned Romans 13 to each other, as if we all know what it says, but we've never actually taken a careful look at Romans 13. Today we will.

This is the 3rd sermon in a series of 3 that are my attempt to unite us on the basis of the apostles' teaching to churches. The New Nationalism, Freedom, and today, Governing Authorities.

I am trying to give you what the apostles stressed with churches. None of these are the whole story on that topic, for sure. But in the NT, these seem to be the *central* story, the *main* message, about each one of these, which should guide and unite our life together.

At the beginning of April, at the elders' meeting, I told J and D what I planned, and I asked if they thought speaking on these things after Easter was a good idea. They both said yes. Over the years, I have a few times brought ideas to the other elders which they did not think were good ideas. I have never gone against them in those cases. This time they said go ahead.

I visited with my friend Ron at the beginning of this week. He and Sharon have four children. Ron and Sharon are both vaccinated, and of their four children, two are vaccinated and two are adamant anti-vaxxers. Here's the thing: it has not caused any turmoil or trouble in family relationships. None. No one judges or needs to change anyone's mind.

They explain their position to one another in one or two minutes, and then they drop it and act like family, and it does not come up again. In this church, we have worked hard to be just like that, and that's a very good thing. Many times people here with very different views on these things have enjoyed each other thoroughly. That's just right.

So, if you disagree with this sermon, and it feels important to you to say that, then in the response time say, "I disagree with this part, or I think I disagree, and this is why." And be done in 1 or 2 minutes. Because others will have other things to say, and they should get a voice too. But let's try to keep all responses brief.

Historical Context of Romans 13

Paul has a brief reminder about submitting to human government in Tts 3, but this section in Romans 13 is more than ten times as long as the Titus reminder. And basically nothing in his other letters. That tells us that this is a problem among believers in Rome. Paul always knew about the churches he wrote to, and for some reason the saints in Rome needed a stern teaching about submitting to the authorities.

We know of two reasons for this. One was the edict of the Emperor Claudius. In the year 49, Claudius expelled many Jews from Rome, because Jews were causing disturbances with each other about someone named “Christ.” We talked about this last week. Paul met Aquila and Priscilla in Corinth, making tents, because Claudius put them out of Rome (Ac18:1).

That was in 49. In the year 54, Claudius died, and the next emperor Nero did not care about the edict of Claudius, so many Jews moved back. Paul wrote to Rome a couple years later, and by then Priscilla and Aquila were back in Rome, and probably quite a few others, too.

So now think about this: in 49, many of the prominent Jews in the church had to leave Rome. This will be remembered with distress and with resentment, certainly by the Jews, and probably also by some of the Gentiles in the church. They had reasons to resent government.

We know about the edict of Claudius because of the Bible and also Roman historians. The second reason for trouble in Rome comes from two other historians, Tacitus (56–120) and Suetonius (69-122). There was growing unrest in the city of Rome during the mid-50s because of those who collected the taxes and revenues.

We don’t know exactly what they were doing, but tax collectors were misbehaving, doing what they wanted, and city turmoil and unrest got so bad that the next emperor, Nero, eventually stepped in to regulate the tax collectors. Nero was emperor for 14 years, and for the first half of that he was a good ruler.

Paul ended his section on governing authorities with paying taxes. That was not an afterthought. It was the application. Paul wrote to Rome when the city was in turmoil exactly about taxes and tolls, and the believers needed to hear that part.

Claudius expelling the Jews from Rome in 49, and the tax unrest in the 50s, both must have played some part in why we have Romans 13, but more than that we cannot say. But this is one of the times when it helps to know some history behind the Scripture. Now to the end of Romans 12. The end of Romans 12 helps us understand Romans 13.

Responding to Persecution and Mistreatment – 12:17-21

¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse.... ¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil. This is exactly how Christ taught us to respond. Don’t curse the persecutors, rather bless them. Don’t retaliate when people do evil to you. The last part of Romans 12 already sets a general tone: believers endure persecution, and people do bad things to us. That happened in Rome.

Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. ¹⁸ If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

These are remarkable lines. Last week we mentioned being guided by public opinion, and this is the same thing again. Christians in the unbelieving world have a particular flavour. Last week we read 1 Peter, and Titus. Here are two more.

Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. We love and worship Christ. Sometimes we will have trouble just for that, and we must make sure that is the only reason.

12:19 *Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord.* ²⁰ *On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."* ²¹ *Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

V19 picks up from v17, do not repay anyone evil for evil. Getting even is God's job, and he wants it. Give him room to work, it is his business to repay evil. "Coals of fire" on the head is just what it sound like, God's severe punishment. We need to know that when evil people get away with stuff, and we don't get even, that the story is not over.

Ps 140 talks about burning coals: "*Rescue me, Lord, from evildoers; protect me from the violent. May burning coals fall on them, may they be thrown into the fire, may disaster hunt down the violent.*" Paul says it will happen.

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. When someone does evil to me, I am immediately in a battle with evil, not with that person, but with evil itself. If I get even and do evil back, then I lost the battle. Evil overcame me. If I do not repay with evil but I do good to the person, I won the battle over evil. The enemy is not the other person, it is evil itself.

Now we move to chapter 13, about governing authorities, but it is just a specific example of the last 5 verses of chapter 12. The real topic has not changed. Pretend there is no chapter division after chapter 12, and there is no topic heading that says "governing authorities."

We have been told about persecutors, and then about those who do evil, and the importance of being at peace with everyone, to do what is right in the eyes of everyone; and now about governing authorities. Not much as changed. The line "don't be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" could as easily begin ch. 13 as end ch. 12.

Basic Instruction – Romans 13:1a

Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities. There is no ambiguity about any of that.

The God Reason, Stated Two Ways – Romans 13:1b

There is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. These lines are both clear, same thing two ways, and the only reason for Paul to repeat them is that the Roman believers will be reluctant to accept this.

Paul is reading Jeremiah 27 - *The Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: “With my great power and my outstretched arm I made the earth and its people and the animals that are on it, and I give it to anyone I please. Now I will give all your countries into the hands of my servant Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon.” “My servant Nebuchadnezzar.”*

Daniel 4:17 - *The Most High is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and gives them to anyone he wishes and sets over them the lowliest of people.’ You will eat grass like the ox ... until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and gives them to anyone he wishes (4:25, 32; 5:21).*

These are why Paul writes, *“There is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.”*

Opposing God and Receiving Judgement – Romans 13:2

Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves.

Jeremiah 27:8 God says, *“If, however, any nation or kingdom will not serve Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon or bow its neck under his yoke, **I will punish** that nation with the sword, famine and plague, declares the Lord, **until I destroy it** by his hand.”*

The good news is (Jer 27:11-12, 17): *But if any nation will bow its neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon and serve him, I will let that nation remain in its own land to till it and to live there, declares the Lord.... Serve the king of Babylon, and you will live. Why should Jerusalem become a ruin? The Jews did not listen to Jeremiah.*

There were many false prophets in Jeremiah’s time. The Jews wanted to believe the false prophets, and did. The false prophets were a big problem. They all said, “Do not submit to Babylon, God does not want us to submit to Babylon, Jeremiah is wrong.”

Human Authorities are God’s Servants – Romans 13:3-5

For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended. ⁴ For the one in authority is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God’s servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment

on the wrongdoer. ⁵ *Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience.*

God put human authorities in place as his servants. Paul emphasizes that, he says it three times. Chaos and anarchy are very hard on good and quiet people, they are terrible, and God does not want that. So God sets up governing authorities for the good of the people. Human governments have never done this particularly well, but complete chaos and lawlessness are very bad, so God set up human governments.

Our Scripture today does *not* cover every situation, and it is *not* a complete theology of government. Everyone who calls Jesus “Lord” at some point will say, “we must obey God rather than men.” Absolutely! Paul knows that, but he does not cover that here. Babylonians wanted Daniel’s three friends to worship an image, but they refused. Revelation, especially Revelation 12-13, covers those kind of situations.

Romans 12:18 says, “*if possible, as much as lies within you, leave peaceably with all.*” But it is not possible for us to do what God forbids.

The stories of Jeremiah and Daniel give us some guidance here, the kind of things they did submit to, and so also the story of Aquila and Priscilla. They submitted to pretty hard things.

We submit, Paul says at the end of that paragraph, because of punishment and because of conscience. The punishment is clear enough, and in Jeremiah God was behind it. “Conscience” is because we know that God has put the authorities there, and because we serve God, it will trouble our conscience not to submit to them.

There are three NT texts like this: Romans 13, briefly in Tts 3, and 1 Peter 2. In none of those teachings is there any worry that believers will take submission too far. The apostles are not worried about taking it too far, but rather about not taking it far enough. Let’s be the same.

Taxes – Romans 13:6-7

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.*

They are God’s servants, so for God’s sake we give them what they have coming: taxes, revenue, respect, honour.

But What If the Authorities are not Doing Good?

Some take “they are God’s servants to us for good” to mean that we evaluate authority, and if they are not doing good, then we do not submit to them. This is an old teaching, and it does not work for me, and I will tell you why it does not work for me.

1, It’s not what it says. When we read that they are God’s servants to us for good, that’s giving us *God’s* motive, for why *God* set up governing authorities. IF you think the authorities are good, then submit to them – that is what it does NOT say. IF your enemy is hungry, then feed him; IF your enemy is thirsty, give him a drink. Paul can write like that, but there’s nothing like that in Romans 13.

2, The Romans 12 context sets us up for pretty unpleasant government: persecution, enemies, wrath, revenge, overcome evil with good. The Romans 12 verses lead us to expect that we will *not* think they are being good for us.

3, Priscilla and Aquila were expelled from Rome. They will not think that is good, and yet they are to give respect and honour. There is a unpleasant taxation problem in Rome at this time, making life harder than it needs to be. And what are the Babylonians doing to Jerusalem? We would not say the Babylonians were God’s servants for good. But God is not asking us what we think.

4. If I decide to evaluate the government based on if I think they are good or bad, then God is not the one who gives them authority. I am. If I think they are doing right, then I submit to them, if I think they are bringing harm, then I take back the authority I gave them. Why would Paul bother to write that? It makes no sense. People, let’s just take it straight on.

The real message of Romans 13 is in Romans 12: *Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse...Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord. On the contrary: “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. Amen.*

PRAYER: God, have mercy on us. These are hard times to live in the kind of unity you urged on us. We are confident that your Spirit is a match for any of the forces that divide us, and we ask for you help. Amen.

BENEDICTION: (from Romans 15) May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give us a spirit of unity among ourselves as we follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth we may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Go in God’s peace to love and serve the Lord.