

A Study in the Book of Romans

31

Romans 13:1-15:13

Key Verse

“ Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law. ”

In **Romans 13:1-7**, Paul reveals that the keynote of the Christian’s life – love – also finds its expression in our attitude to the governing authorities over us.

Our Attitude to Authorities

Continuing on from the principles of **12:17-21**, Paul now examines a question that would surely arise in the minds of his readers. What about the Roman government? What should be our attitude to the authority that Caesar’s imperial government wields over our lives?

In answer to this unspoken question, Paul begins to deal with the Christian approach to secular authority.

The responsibility of submission

Read Romans 13:1

This concept of submitting to the governing authorities is consistent throughout Scripture. We find it developed by Paul in three ways:

Pray for them

In **1 Timothy 2:1-4**, Paul writes:

“I urge, then, first of all that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone – for kings and all those in authority...”

Introduction

The Gospel’s Three Revelations

The Gospel’s Three Answers

The Gospel’s Answer to Israel

The Gospel in Action

Conclusion

Paul goes on to give Timothy three reasons why we should pray for authorities:

- ☞ **For our sake** – “...that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.”
- ☞ **For God’s sake** – “This is good, and pleases God our Savior...”
- ☞ **For others’ sake** – “...who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.”

Obey them

In **Titus 3:1**, Paul reminds Titus of a principle he had obviously laid down before:

“Remind the people to be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready to do whatever is good.”

Paul is not speaking here of a begrudging obedience but of an attitude of continual readiness to obey.

Honor them

Peter too issues this specific command in **1 Peter 2:13-17**:

“Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right.”

The Scriptural pattern is to respect those in authority and give them the honor due them according to their positions. This combination of respect and obedience makes up the biblical word “submit,” which in Paul’s Greek meant “to yield, to bring yourself under [another], to obey, to be subject to.”

The reason for submission

Read Romans 13:1-6

These three aspects of submission – praying for authorities, obeying authorities and honoring authorities – not only benefit us in the results they have in our social life, but also have a dramatic effect upon our own hearts. For a continual attitude of submission keeps our hearts pure before God and men.

This becomes more obvious, perhaps, when we see what the opposite of these attitudes are. The opposite of praying for authorities is *blaming* them. Instead of asking God’s blessing for them, we would rather he judge them for all the problems and difficulties they have caused. This comes from a bitter heart, not the heart of the child of God. The opposite of obeying the authorities is *rebelling* against them. This is the spirit of the world, and comes from an angry and aggressive heart. And the opposite of honoring those in authority is *slandering* them. This comes from an evil, malicious heart – a characteristic of those who live under the power of “the prince of the power of the air” (**Ephesians 2:1-2**, KJV).

So the attitude of submission to the governing authorities is not just for our rulers' sake, or for the community's sake, but also for our own sake! Not to submit means to poison our own souls; to do so means quietness and peace, for only then can we live in "all godliness and holiness."

God is the Ultimate Authority

However, Paul's main reason for submitting to authorities is that all governing authorities derive their authority from God. In other words, those who exercise authority on earth do so, whether they know it or not, by delegation from God. This is not referring to the worthiness (or otherwise) of the individual in authority, but rather to the offices of authority themselves. **Daniel 4:17** states this clearly:

"...that the living may know that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes and sets over them the lowliest of men."

Thus Paul exhorts us to submit to the authorities *as though we are submitting to the Lord himself* for he is the ultimate authority behind them all. We should submit, not just because to refuse to do so means punishment from them, but also "because of conscience." Because they represent the Lord's authority, only by obedience can we keep our consciences clear before the Lord (**13:2-5**).

The Limitations to Submission

Read Romans 13:7

With this principle of submission clearly laid down, Paul goes on to show the clear boundaries of our submission to governing authorities – "give what you owe."

Paul lists four items that a person may "owe" those who govern:

- ☞ Taxes
- ☞ Revenue
- ☞ Respect
- ☞ Honor

We read in **Matthew 22:15-22** how the Pharisees set out to trap Jesus in this very issue:

"'Teacher,' they said 'we know that you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren't swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are. Tell us then what is your opinion? Is it right to pay taxes or not?'"

The first century Jews were living in an unjust society. Jesus' reply to them gives us the clear guideline for living in any society, *whatever* its condition:

"...Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, 'You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? Show me the coin used for paying the tax.' They brought him a

denarius, and he asked them, ‘Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?’ ‘Caesar’s’ they replied. Then he said to them, ‘Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s’...”

We are to submit to the delegation of authority that God has given men, but if a government or authority steps outside the sphere of delegation and demands an obedience in an area that is not theirs – an area which breaks the higher authority of God himself – then the Christian cannot and must not obey. For example, the three Hebrew men were thrown into the fiery furnace for refusing to obey the King’s command to bow down and worship the Golden Image (**Daniel 3**). This was because King Nebuchadnezzar was transcending his authority and trespassing upon the sphere that belongs to God alone. So also did the Sanhedrin in **Acts 4:1-22** when they commanded Peter and John not to speak or teach in the name of Jesus. Thus the disciples answered:

“Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God’s sight to obey you rather than God.”

This is why Paul tells Titus “to be ready to do what is good.” We cannot obey evil commands. Whenever obedience to man is inconsistent with obedience to God, the Christian must *always* obey the higher authority of God himself. But this does not change a Christian’s heart-attitude, for the principle of submission is still operating in his life – firstly to God and, secondly, to God’s delegated authorities.

The Debt of Love

Read Romans 13:8-10

In **13:6-7**, Paul has exhorted the Christian to pay his public debts – everything that is owed to people whether it be respect or honor or revenue or taxes. Now he turns his attention to our private debts, and encourages the Christian to fulfill every obligation he has to his fellowman. “Owe no man anything” (KJV), he says.

But Paul then goes on to speak of one debt that we *must* pay but which will *never* be fully paid off – the debt of love. There will never come a point in time when we can say concerning another, “There, I’ve loved you enough! That debt is paid.” As Paul says in **1 Corinthians 13:8**, “Love never fails.” In other words, it never runs out! God’s love within us, overflowing to those around us, comes from a perennial, unfailing “spring” deep within us. As Jesus described it in **John 7:38-39**:

“Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him’. By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive.”

When queried by the Pharisees as to which commandment in the Sinai Covenant that he thought to be the greatest, Jesus replied in **Matthew 22:37-40**:

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is

like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

When our lives are filled with love for God and others, no outward Law is necessary, for this love fulfils the whole Law.

Read Galatians 5:14

Read James 2:8

The Urgency of Time

Read Romans 13:11-14

“Do this (pay the debt of love to your fellow-man)” says Paul, “*understanding the present time.*” Throughout Scripture an emphasis is placed upon the importance of understanding the day in which we live. Every age and generation has had its particular “visitation” from God, for God has been involved in the affairs of mankind through all the generations as he sovereignly unfolds his purpose for man.

Each generation brings about another stage of this unfolding plan. Knowing what God has been doing at a particular time in history has been the awesome privilege of His faithful ones. When Enoch came to understand his day and the impending judgment of the Flood, it would appear, at the time of Methuselah. The meaning of his name is uncertain, but it could mean, “[when] he dies, there [comes] a dart (or sending forth)”¹ or “when he dies, there shall be an emission.”² Something obviously happened at the time of Methuselah’s birth that caused Enoch to walk with God (**Genesis 5:21-27**). And we get a hint at what it was, for in the year that Methuselah died, the Flood came. It appears that his lifespan acted as a grand countdown to the coming judgment.*

Noah and his family stood alone in their generation because they knew what God was doing in their day (**Genesis 6:8**). Abraham left all to be “the father of many nations” (**Genesis 12:1-4**). Moses gave up the riches of Egypt to fulfill God’s purpose in his life – to lead the people of Israel to the Promised Land (see **Hebrews 11:1-16,24-27**). The Scripture says of the men of Issachar who joined David, “they understood the times” (**1 Chronicles 12:32**). Jesus wept over Jerusalem because they “did not recognize the time of God’s coming” to them (**Luke 19:41-44**), and so rejected him. Luther, Wesley, Booth and countless others saw God move mightily in their generation, for they understood their time. The one important factor for all of them was they knew what God was doing in their day and became vessels for him to use. And so it goes on all through history to this present day.

So, here in **13:11**, Paul urges the Christian to understand the present time – to know what God is up to in his program as he unfolds his plan and purpose for mankind. Every Christian is called to the privilege of being involved in God’s purposes on earth in his or her generation.

* At 969 years, Methuselah holds the record as being the oldest man who ever lived, and his longevity reveals God’s great mercy and long-suffering to pre-Flood mankind. If Methuselah’s life was the countdown to judgment, God stretched it out as long as possible.

For all generations, “our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.” We must live with eternity constantly in view! So, in the face of the urgency of the time, Paul brings three strong exhortations:

Wake up

Read Romans 13:11-12

There is no place for spiritual slumber in the life of the Christian. With the clear understanding of our times, and eternity our constant focus-point, we are to make every minute count for the Lord.

Put on the armor of light

Read Romans 13:12-13

Paul lists six sins which are typical of the “deeds of darkness.” These six vices are orgies, drunkenness, sexual immorality, debauchery, dissension and jealousy, or, as the New Living Translation calls them, wild parties, getting drunk, adultery, immoral living, fighting and jealousy. Paul tells us to shed these types of sin as we would our night-clothes when we wake in the morning, and to dress ourselves for the day. And our “day clothes” include the “armor of light”!

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:5-8

Clothe yourselves with Christ

Read Romans 13:14

We are to put on the Lord Jesus as a man puts on a garment. This phrase is echoed by Paul in **Galatians 3:27**:

“...for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.”

In other words, whereas in the past we had worn sin like outward garments, obvious to everyone, now, Paul exhorts, let all that Jesus is (and all that we have received in him) appear on the outside in our lives and conduct before others. In **Colossians 3:10**, Paul exhorts us to “put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.” He describes this new self, which we are to put on like a garment, in **Colossians 3:12-14**:

“Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and loved, *clothe yourselves* with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues *put on* love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.”

Paul reveals seven virtues in all, each of which are “threads” in the Christ-garment we are called to wear. These virtues are:

- Compassion
- Kindness
- Humility

- Gentleness
- Patience
- Tolerance
- Forgiveness

And, Paul says, these seven virtues are covered and bound together in perfect unity by one super-virtue – the same “sincere love” Paul introduced in **Romans 12:9**! And in **Galatians 5:22-23**, Paul reveals that this “wardrobe” is provided by the Holy Spirit!

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.”

Our Attitude to the Flesh

Read Romans 13:14

As Paul closes **Romans 13**, he makes one defining statement. Paul’s words, translated by the *New King James Version*, are:

“But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts.”

The Greek word translated “provision” means “forethought,” or a thinking ahead. The word “flesh” means just that – the “flesh” of the human body – and refers to the body’s natural appetites. Do you remember back in **8:5** where, as the *New King James Version* translates it, Paul writes:

“For those who live according to the flesh *set their minds on the things of the flesh*, but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit.”

Here in **13:14**, Paul is tying up the whole of his message in **Romans 12-13** by pointing back to **Romans 8**. In short, he is saying:

- Put on the new self – which is Christ himself
- Change your focus from the flesh to the Spirit

This issue of focus – where you set your mind – is central to Paul’s teaching on walking in the Spirit. And so, in the last verse of Romans 13, Paul tells his readers to make sure that they do not set their minds on the flesh and its desires. The *New Living Translation* words **13:14** this way:

“But let the Lord Jesus Christ take control of you, and don’t think of ways to indulge your evil desires.”

Our Attitude to Weaker Christians

Read Romans 14:1-4

Paul defines those who are “weak in faith” as those who have not yet discovered the fullness of the liberty which is found in Christ. They have come to know the

Savior (forgiveness of sins) but still govern their lives by rules and regulations, which Paul, in **7:6**, calls “the old way of the written code.” He mentions two areas of the written code as examples:

- The abstaining from certain foods
- The observance of certain days

Though the Gospel has set us free from these religious regulations, some believers (particularly the Jewish Christians of Paul’s day) could not fully receive this liberty (note **Acts 10:9-16; Galatians 2:11-14**).

Paul directs his statements to those “who are strong in the faith,” for he does not want their very strength to be the cause of division within the Church. After writing so much about the reality of the believer’s freedom from the Law, he now exhorts that this new liberty not become the grounds for division by those who have found it “looking down” upon those who have not yet fully received it. As he also says in **Galatians 5:1,13**, as translated by the *New King James Version*:

“Stand fast therefore in the liberty with which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage [to the Law]...only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but *by love serve one another*.”

What attitude should the “strong” take? Should they look down upon the “weak” and try to put them right? No, says Paul...

Do not judge

Read Romans 14:2-13

It is not for us to judge one another. Each believer stands individually before his Lord. Each must be convinced in his own mind and be clear in his own conscience. On the one hand, those who enjoy greater liberty must not take a superior attitude to those who do not, and on the other, those who still follow certain regulations must not be critical of the others for doing what they themselves refuse to do.

Read Colossians 2:16-17

Do not be a stumbling block

Read Romans 14:13-23

Though we may be convinced in our own heart concerning our liberty in Christ, we must be careful that our liberty does not cause damage to a weaker Christian. If, by our insistence on exercising Gospel-based liberty, a weaker Christian follows our example of liberty but does so without being fully convinced in his own mind and conscience, he is not doing it “in faith” and therefore it becomes sin to him (**14:23**), and we, who are free, have become an obstacle which has caused him to stumble. So Paul here gives four all-important principles for us to use as guidelines in our attitude to other Christians:

- Everything should be done unto the Lord (**14:6-7**)
- Everything should be governed by righteousness, peace and joy (**14:17**)

- Everything should be done for peace and mutual edification (**14:19**)
- Everything should be done in faith (**14:23**)

Note Paul's governing principle in **14:17-18**:

“For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men.”

We know from **Hebrews 11:6** that it is impossible to please God without faith, so if Paul is saying that serving Christ in the way of “righteousness, peace and joy” is “pleasing to God,” it must be motivated by faith!

Paul also identifies this “righteousness, peace and joy” as being “in the Holy Spirit.” It is only through faith and by the power of God's Spirit that true “righteousness, peace and joy” can govern our relationships with other Christians. No wonder this is not only pleasing to God but also “approved by men.” Everyone – Christian and non-Christian alike – recognizes that if there is “righteousness, peace and joy” being expressed in a relationship, somebody is doing something right!

But rather, love!

Read Romans 15:1-12

We now enter the next chapter of Paul's letter, where Paul gives some practical tips on how these relationships can be governed by “righteousness, peace and joy.” He now outlays five principles of love which, when put into operation, will bring such a spirit of unity amongst believers that “with one heart and mouth” we will “glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (**15:5-6**).

- **Bear with the failings of the weak (15:1)** – Love tolerates the prejudices and faults which come from weakness of faith.
- **Do not please yourself (15:1)** – Our greatest example is, of course, the Lord Jesus himself (**15:3**). No one knew greater liberty than he, but he did not put the enjoyment of his liberty before the needs of others. Instead he gave himself as a servant to the Jews in order to bring liberty to them and hope to the Gentiles (**15:2-12**). And, next to Jesus, there was never anyone more thoroughly liberated than Paul. In fact, Paul was so completely free from spiritual bondage that he was not even in bondage to freedom! Like his Lord, Paul could forego his freedom any time he decided – by choice – as he explained in **1 Corinthians 9:19-22**: “Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible...” Love for others was his foremost motive.
- **Build one another up (15:2)** – Rather than pulling one another down by judging each other's level of “spirituality,” we are, instead, to do the opposite! We are always to speak words of encouragement to one another (see **Hebrews 10:24-25**). In the following verses, Paul goes on to tell us *how* we can build one another up...

- **Learn from the examples in the written Word (15:3-4)** – The experiences of believers of old are recorded in the Scriptures so that we can learn from their lives just how faithful God is in every situation of life. Their life accounts are written, says Paul, to encourage us and to give us endurance through our trials of faith (see **1 Corinthians 10:11; 2 Timothy 3:16-17; Psalm 119:105**). As we apply to our own lives what we learn from their experiences, our hearts are filled with hope. And we build one another up as we share the reality of the Word with one another.
- **Accept one another (15:7)** – We are to accept one another in the same way that Jesus has accepted us – not based upon their merits, but upon his love. In the same spirit of grace ministered to us, we are now to minister to one another. As John so beautifully expresses it in **1 John 5:1**: “Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves the father loves his child as well.”

Putting into practice these five principles of love builds a “spirit of unity.” And what is the secret of practicing these five principles? In **15:5**, Paul explains it clearly:

“May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves *as you follow Christ Jesus.*”

The secret to the whole of Romans 13-15 is found in that simple phrase – “as you follow Christ Jesus.” For it is as we walk in the footsteps of the Lord Jesus that we express love as he did.

Read Ephesians 5:1-2

The Heart of God

Paul is now coming to the close of his letter. He has covered much ground concerning the wonderful work of salvation accomplished by Christ. He has been very outspoken – very bold – concerning the truths of the Gospel, and the liberty it has brought us out from the bondage under the Law (**15:15**). Now, as he gives his closing thoughts, he shares with us the closest thing that is upon his heart, and, indeed, upon the heart of God – the salvation of those as yet unreached.

God’s love for mankind – and his desire for their salvation – was so great that he gave everything of himself to make it possible for us to come into relationship with him. He became:

A servant of the Jews

Read Romans 15:8

Jesus came down as a servant of God’s truth. He “worked” for the Jews in order to fulfill every word and promise God had made to them and to their patriarchs.

Read Luke 22:27

Read Matthew 20:28

The hope of the Gentiles

Read Romans 15:9-12

Christ's service to the Jews was not for their sake alone. The promises given to them also included the promise that the Gentiles would find their hope in him. And this hope is the result, says Paul, of the unparalleled mercy of God (**15:9**). Paul then quotes four Old Testament scriptures to verify this.

Through the Lord Jesus, the "God of hope" offers hope to a hopeless world (**15:13**). Our trust in this great work of service by Christ brings us four things:

- **Joy** – an overflowing heart because righteousness has brought us relationship with God. As Peter put it in **1 Peter 1:8-9**: "Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls."
- **Peace** – a rest because we know we belong to God and he has all things under his control (remember **8:28** and **8:31-37?**). In **Philippians 4:7**, Paul promises that "...the peace of God, which transcends understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."
- **Hope** – a glorious future in eternity. In **Colossians 1:27**, Paul writes: "To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory."
- **Power** – a supernatural empowering, by the Spirit of God, enabling us to meet all circumstances and overcome all obstacles, as described in **2 Corinthians 4:7**: "But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all surpassing power is from God and not from us."

This is God's heart and desire for every man, woman and child on the earth. We reach out to others with the message of the Gospel so that this "God of hope" may be known and experienced by all – Jew and Gentile alike.

¹ *Matthew Henry's Concise Commentary on the Whole Bible*, Genesis 5:25-32, excerpted from QuickVerse 6.0.
² *Thayer's Greek Definitions*, G3103, excerpted from QuickVerse 6.0.