

## Romans 13:1-10

In Paul's time, the Roman Emperors ruled Palestine as foreigners, and while it brought many benefits to the region, Rome ruled with a heavy hand, and their peace was enforced. When the letter to the Roman church was written, Nero was emperor, and the state religion was not Judaism, the golden age had long passed. This might ring bells for you for our own times.

While Nero had not yet begun his persecutions, Jews (and others) were viewed with some suspicion. Only a decade before this letter many Jews had been expelled from Rome for causing unrest. Christians also had reason to be cautious, for they were viewed as a troublemaking breakaway element with strange customs. Both groups were therefore careful to publicly stress their good citizenship, against the gossip that they were subversive, and lest they incur the wrath of Roman leaders.

Paul as a Roman citizen, understands this, and encourages the church to continue to live well as God's people, as they offered their lives in service to Jesus, so they might be a witness for him in their world. In this chapter he continues discussing what that looks like day to day, considering two aspects of being a dutiful citizen. Firstly there is the matter of a believer's obligations to the State. Second the believer's relationships with other people.

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### The Higher Authority and Civic Duty

The Old Testament clearly taught God was sovereign over earthly rulers (Proverbs 16:10; 21:1). Nothing changes in the NT, James warns those in leadership, they will be held accountable by God for their use of power - it's not a job to be taken lightly (James 3:1).

In Romans 13 Paul teaches that earthly rulers exercise power as servants of God, however, they are not free agents - they too are accountable. Their responsibility is to do good and deal with wrongdoing according to the Lord's frameworks, not their own. So the authority of the State is a delegated, not an absolute authority.

Paul doesn't say what Christians should do when the State fails in this duty, because he is speaking about the general situation of an orderly government. But by implication, you can hear the room to exercise civil disobedience when the state is out of order, ungodly and unjust. There are times when some Christians have been front and centre in disobeying the government: in Nazi Germany and for civil rights in various countries for example. Sit ins lobbying for the closing of detention centres, and action for indigenous constitutional recognition are current examples. At these same moments, in these same situations fellow Christians have believed the letter of Paul indicates strict obedience to all authorities however they rule. Both positions come from the same passage.

How do you hear it? Can you hear the position of others as well as your own?

### **So what is a person's civic duty?**

Judaism believed in submission to earthly authorities unless it involved a conflict with God's law. But submission to civic law was not always a matter of straightforward obedience. Some

Palestinian Jews wanted to revolt against Rome, which would occur in less than a decade, but many favoured nonresistant submission or nonviolent resistance, believing that God had ordained all civil authorities. Believers were sometimes forced to serve the government by keeping their heads down and staying out of trouble. It's a fearful way to be a citizen but sometimes necessary. Christians have observed this range of civil obedience and disobedience across the centuries.

When Paul opens this chapter, he is drawing on conventional teaching which applies to most situations, most of the time, and to all citizens of a State, Christians included. Allegiance to God does not remove our civic responsibilities. He says:

*Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established...whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and...will bring judgment on themselves (Romans 13:1-3).*

Paul's instruction is also practical. Submission to authorities means you give what you owe to those who govern, even in terms of respect and honour. Jesus also held this view: 'Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's' and other NT writers say similar things (Mark 12:17, 1 Timothy 2:1-2, Titus 3:1, 1 Peter 2:13-17).

The Roman State did do bad things and they were a strong regime with strong power; even its court system played on social class and status. But it generally advocated justice, and at this point the Christians had nothing to fear...if they were obedient servants. So Paul says: pay your taxes, cast your vote, sing the anthem and observe the rules.

Believers submit to authorities, not only because of punishment that could come for rebellion, or merely as a way of ensuring their communities are well regarded, but also as a matter of conscience before God. We understand that we serve the government with purpose and confidence based on the knowledge that God is the one to whom all answer, that he has (for his sometimes unfathomable purposes), allowed the authorities to be in place. As good citizens, we remain faithful to the one who rules over our earthly leaders. Daniel sings to us from the OT:

*Praise be to the name of God for ever and ever; wisdom and power are his.*

*He changes times and seasons; he deposes kings and raises up others (Daniel 2:21-22)*

The Lord Almighty holds ultimate authority, ultimate knowledge and his purposes govern creation...despite what it may look like to us living in the thick of things down here, leaders change, the wicked are deposed, and God's ways of justice will prevail. The civil authorities serve at his permission whether they acknowledge him or not, they can be overturned at his discretion.

In dark times, this conviction becomes a prayer - *Lord change the heart of our leaders! Raise up those who love your ways!*

At this point it's vital to understand Paul is not advocating uncritical submission to government. He was aware of State corruption and abuse, and he suffered at the hands of Jewish and Roman authorities: slander, criticism, harassment, flogging and imprisonment. Paul sometimes

moved on when a town kicked him out (discretion is sometimes the better part of valour), on other occasions he persisted and was arrested (Acts 13:49-51, 14, 21:27-36).

Out of his experience and wisdom he calls us to be good citizens, **and** believes our allegiance to the State comes second to our allegiance to Christ. In a letter from a Roman gaol, Paul says 'our citizenship is in heaven' (Philippians 3:20). This is a protest statement and it has large implications - we keep an eye and an ear to Jesus as we walk the laws of the land.

When the decrees of State conflict disturbingly with the commandments of God, Christians may say: 'we must obey God rather than men' as Peter and the Apostles did when the Jews commanded them to stop speaking about Jesus (Acts 5:29). The readings from Ezekiel and Matthew suggest it's part of our duty to speak up against wrongdoing (Ezekiel 33:7-11, Matthew 18:10-20). And in instances when leaders go beyond the authority delegated by God, Christians may also answer 'No'. Here we have the Hebrew midwives who lied to save babies, including Moses, against Egyptian law, and who received God's blessing for their insurrection (Exodus 1).

During the OT exile we see the tension of obedience and conscientious objection. The prophet Jeremiah faithfully instructed the Israelites to accept their time in Babylon, the land of their oppressors: he said 'build homes, get married, have children and bring prosperity to the city of their exile'. In this same setting some Jewish men protested Nebuchadnezzar's policies: Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego and Daniel observed a diet which conformed to Jewish laws, despite requirements they eat the King's meals. At later times, these three were thrown into a furnace and Daniel into a lion's den for refusing to worship the King and bowing to the Lord instead. They were willing to lose their lives and did not expect the Lord to rescue them, but he did. Jeremiah and the 4 men were each obedient in their duty to God and their relationship to the same state power.

Faithful believers have been convicted to stand against authorities or their church at high cost over the centuries. I commend to you the biographies of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Christians under apartheid or communism; or the stories of believers from modern countries where Christianity is outlawed; or those within Western nations standing for justice or peace, or against policies of church or state which they believe to be against God's ways or in violation of human rights. You may have a personal story to tell in these matters.

Now, let's return to this passage. In general situations of orderly government, Christians ought to obey the laws, pay their taxes and respect the authorities—not because it will be the worse for them if they don't, but because it is part of the way they serve their Lord.

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## The Law of Love

The second point Paul makes is: the principles of love governs our relational world.

I find it interesting that civic duty and duty to God are set in close proximity to the duty to love. It's not the only place that this occurs. In the Two Great Commandments Jesus sums up the law into a memorable catch phrase. What is the Greatest Commandment ?

*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.*

Excellent! I'll live my life according to this, make sure everyone does the same, and we are ready to walk away feeling righteous. But it's a double barreled commandment...

*...and love your neighbour as yourself.*

And then we recall the parable of the Samaritan...Ouch! First John says something similar:

*And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us (1John3:23).*

We would like to, be we cannot, separate them. To enact allegiance to God we must enact love for the other or as Paul says - do no harm to your neighbour.

Remember how often the NT says believers are to prioritise love for others (John 13:34-35, 15:12, 17, Romans 12:10, Galatians 5:13, Ephesians 4:12, 1Corinthians 13:13, 1Thessalonians 4:9, Hebrews 10:24, 1Peter 1:22, 3:8, 1John 3:11, 4:7-12, 2John 1:5).

*My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you (John 15:12).*

*And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.  
(1Corinthians 13:13)*

*Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God (1John 4:7).*

There is the real possibility of conflict between our duty to the State and to God. We must be willing to be loyal to God and his ways should we be faced with a choice, and the Spirit convicts us in the core of our being. The decision of civil disobedience must be taken with advice, prayer and careful reflection. If we take this path we should expect it to cost us and that others will not agree with us. It is a defiance of the law, and likely to go against the tide of public and even Christian opinion.

Here Paul says, love fulfils the law. It guides us which ever context we find ourselves in. Love, constrains and restrains us: it presses us forward when we want to do less than God asks us; it pulls us back when we want to go beyond where God is at work. **And whether we comply or protest with the government we are called to do it in a way that is godly.**

When the State is secular but works alongside God's law well enough, we are at the front of the line in being a good citizen, love guides our behaviour and our relationships. **And** when the State is corrupt and we are moved to protest out of allegiance to God, love **still** guides our behaviour and relationships. What might this mean in real terms?

It could mean we don't pressure others to think like us, even though we believe our views are valid. So we express ourselves politely, provide reasons for our perspective and even encourage people to rethink, but leave them to make their own decision. This is respectful love.

It could mean we listen desiring to comprehend another's perspective and be enlightened, even if we end up unconvinced, even if we swallow our pride and change our mind. This is love that is humble, open to new information or correction.

It could be we discern unreasonable expectations on others and we speak up for them against prevailing opinion. This is love that understands boundaries and commits themselves into Father's hands in trust and perseverance against the tide of conformity, having integrity of conviction and love for others above self.

It could mean we are careful with our language, that we do not slander our opponents, and consider the means we utilise are as important as the end we have in mind. This is love that honours and protests cleanly in the hope of future relationships in a new context hoping that a time will come when reconciliation is possible.

It could mean that we pursue the peace that is in our scope, or shoulder the cost we may have to bear for our non-compliance, and that we find a way to live godly lives when the situation does not change or becomes unsafe for us. This is love that is long suffering and waits for God's justice and timing, this is love that sometimes has to walk away from a person or a situation that is not ok. And sometimes means we run away.

In summary, as believers we are not to see ourselves as free to obey authority or not, as we please. We obey our governments because God has arranged our societies in an orderly fashion under his authority. And we are to keep our relationships with others based on God's law, whose principle is love. When orderly government comes undone, we are duty bound to protest, understanding we remain constrained by the law of love in obedience to God. Whatever we do or do not do, we are to love and this can have many forms.

Love is the fruit of the Spirit and against such there is no law (Galatians 5:22-23). And from Jesus: by this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another (John 13:35).

Lord, may your word live in us and bear much fruit to your glory in the places you have put us. Amen.