

Good Citizens and Good Neighbors

Romans 13:1-14

We live in a highly contentious political environment. The vitriol, the anger, the protests, the disrespect of those in authority, lawlessness from some, the politicizing of almost any issue, the inability or unwillingness to see both sides, the divisiveness even among believers and families all lead to conflict and taking sides. So when we come to Romans 13 we have a tendency to read into it what we believe or to rationalize its meaning to fit our perspective. When it comes to the Christian's role in respect to government it is not unusual to find believers at odds with each quoting some Scripture to defend their point. So my goal this morning is to see if we can reach a clearer understanding of what it means to be good citizens and good neighbors in the world in which we live.

That brings us to Romans 13 the central New Testament passage regarding how Christians should relate to human government. *Before we jump into the passage, I want to tell you frankly that when I am finished, you will still have many questions.* This passage answers some questions, and it raises many others in the process. For instance, what does it mean to be a Christian living under a pagan government? Is violent revolution ever justified? What about capital punishment? Is it wrong to pay taxes to an unjust government? What about picketing abortion clinics? Under what circumstances should Christians disobey the law? Should Christians serve in the armed forces? How do you respond when those over you are corrupt? How far should we go to express our Christian concerns?

These are all important questions, and none of them admit of a simple answer. Rather than attempt to answer every possible question, I'm going to lay out the broad teaching of this passage and then leave you to fill in the blanks on your own. Our focus will be on being good citizens and good neighbors.

Theologically let me remind you of the 4 Divine Institutions established by God for the protection of the human race during the angelic conflict. These apply to the whole human race and each one is instituted by God for our protection.

The Divine Institution of Volition

The Divine Institution of Marriage

The Divine Institution of Family

The Divine Institution of Human Government

It is this institution of Human Government that forms the backdrop to our study this morning in Rom. 13. In writing to the Roman believers living under the rule of Nero or any other Caesar Paul reminds them to be good citizens (1-7) part of which is being a good neighbor (8-10) both of which are motivated by the time in which we live (11-14).

I. How to be a Good Citizen Romans 13:1-7

A. Submit to Governing Authorities 13:1a

"Submit" is the Greek word ὑποτασσέσθω (hupotasso). He uses the same word again in vs. 5. It's a familiar word, used over fifty times in the New Testament. *It means to voluntarily follow the direction of those in authority over you.* It is a Greek military term meaning to arrange troops in a military fashion under the command of a leader. Submission is not the same as obedience, though the two are related. Obedience relates to outward performance while submission touches the attitude of the heart toward those who are over you.

It is used of wives submitting to husbands (Col. 3:8); the church to Christ (Eph. 5:24); believers to God (James

4:7); slaves to masters (Titus 2:9) and believers to one another (Eph. 5:21). For the believer it is the attitude of thinking of others as more important than oneself – Phil. 2:3-5.

Here it is an explicit directive for every person. No ifs, ands, or buts. Nothing about whether or not Nero is a Christian or a pagan. Just the word “submit.” “Everyone” is emphatic: every believer. Why submit?

1. Because they are established by God 13:1b-2

The word “authority” is very broad. It’s the Greek word “exousia,” which means “right” or “privilege.” *An authority is anyone who has the right to do something.* In this passage Paul is thinking about human government– rulers, kings and queens, emperors, magistrates, presidents, dictators and potentates of every variety. Please understand a crucial point: *Paul is not thinking about any one particular form of human government, such as democracy, aristocracy, oligarchy, monarchy, or socialism, communism or dictatorship.* Paul is not saying that only American democracy is ordained by God. He’s speaking in broad, general terms about all human government anywhere in the world. The institution of government comes from the hand of God.

The apostle gives us what we might call “the divine right of the state” as he says in the last half of verse 1, “for there is no authority except that which God has established.” Greek word is τεταγμέναι (tetarmeno) from the root “tasso” meaning to put in order, arrange, appoint or assign. Used in Luke 7:8 and Acts 13:48.

When Daniel gave the prophecy of Nebuchadnezzar’s fall, he began by saying: *“Praise be to the name of God for ever and ever; wisdom and power are his. He changes times and seasons; he sets up kings and deposes them.”* (Daniel 2:20, 21)

God takes responsibility for raising up one leader and pulling down another. So the first reason we are to submit to governing authorities is because God put them there. The second reason is because they are God’s servants.

2. Because they are God’s servants 13:3-4

The essential role of government is encapsulated in the designation it is twice given in verse 4: “God’s servant or minister of God.” This is an apt expression of its function because the word for “servant/minister” is *diakonos*, or “deacon.” Government is the deacon of God, and as with any deacon, its job is to humbly serve. The teaching here, then, is that government either wittingly or unwittingly serves God. This, by the way, is the basis for treating our leaders with respect. *Christians ought to lead the way in showing honor to human authorities because we understand they are appointed by God.* These servants of God exist to do 2 things: to punish the wicked (v. 3) and to reward the righteous (v. 4).

a. to punish the wicked 13:4

This is why we have police officers and FBI agents and TSA agents that check our carry-on items at the airport – to catch those who are doing wrong and punish them. At the end of verse 4 the apostle is most explicit about government’s beneficial function: *“He is God’s servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.”* The state is given the responsibility of vengeance, a responsibility that is explicitly forbidden to the individual Christian (12:19). God’s way of dealing with evil is not by personal vengeance, but through justice dispensed by the state.

b. to reward the righteous 13:3b

Are you afraid of those who are over you? Don’t be. Do right and you will have nothing to fear. Admittedly, Paul is speaking of an ideal situation. Still, the principle holds true. Troublemakers get in trouble while those who play by the rules don’t. *In a fallen world, things sometimes get turned upside down, but it’s still better to be a law abiding citizen.* Criminals *do* get caught eventually. If you doubt that, consider that our prison system is

full to overflowing.

Therefore (vs. 5) subject yourself to the governing authorities. First because we fear punishment and second because of conscience. Why do we slow down when we see a police car on the side of the road? Because we are speeding and we don't want to get a ticket.

Second for conscience's sake we submit, because we know that God stands behind every human government working out his will for the human race.

How does this work out on a practical level? Pay taxes – 6-7.

B. Respect Governing Authorities 13:5-7

Paul calls human rulers “ministers of God.” *As such, they deserve four things from us: Taxes, revenue, respect, and honor.* We may think we are heavily taxed (and we are), but hardly more so than in the first century. Rome had an income tax, a head tax, a poll tax, a road tax, a wagon tax, a crop tax, an import tax, an export tax, a harbor tax, and a bridge tax—to name only a few. The Caesars liked to live in style and it cost a lot of money to maintain that huge empire, so they taxed their people heavily in order to pay for everything.

Think about it. Can you imagine being a believer in Rome and being asked to pay taxes for Caesar’s immoral pagan lifestyle?

Paul turns back now from the ministry of the state (through its official representatives) to the duties of individual Christian people, particularly our responsibility to love.

II. How to be a Good Neighbor Romans 13:8-10

A. Be free of debt 13:8a

Earlier in his letter Paul has already referred several times to the importance of paying our debts and includes more than just monetary debts. We are in debt to the unbelieving world to share the gospel with it (1:14); we are in debt to the Holy Spirit to live a holy life (8:12f.); and we are in debt to the state to pay our taxes (13:6f.). It is in fact this reference to debt which forms the transition between verse 7 and verse 8. Let no debt remain outstanding, Paul writes, except the continuing debt to love one another (8a). We are obligated to love our neighbors. It’s a debt.

B. Love your neighbor 13:8b-10

In case we are uncertain what loving our neighbor looks like Paul quotes the Old Testament Law. Love would never permit the things the Old Testament Law forbade. Love would not commit adultery or murder, nor would it steal or covet. All these do harm (*kakos*, evil) to the neighbor, whereas it is the essence of love to seek and to serve our neighbor’s highest good. That is why love is the fulfilment of the law (10b).

Jesus stated the same thing in Matt. 22:34-39 when he was asked what is the greatest commandment? Love God and love others – this fulfills the law.

The reality is that it is much easier to talk about love than to actually love, particularly if that person is different from you – values, lifestyle, language, or worldview. So obviously the only way we love is by the power and enablement of the Holy Spirit.

III. The Motivation to be Good Citizens and Neighbors Romans 13:11-14

Paul does not view this call to horizontal love as a casual matter. He sees it as having utmost urgency. Paul’s sense of urgency is stressed by the word “time” in his opening phrase: “*And do this, knowing the present time.*”

Either of two Greek words could have been used. *Chronos* would emphasize chronological, calendar time. *Kairos* emphasizes quality or kind of time. Paul uses *kairos*. “*And this do, knowing the kind of time it is. . .*” What kind of time is it? The New Testament calls it “the last days” (Acts 2:17; 2 Timothy 3:1; Hebrews 1:2; 1 John 2:18)—not in the chronological sense but qualitatively. Because of what you know theologically, act appropriately. Put another way: Good theology dictates good behavior.

Paul uses the well-known symbols of “night and day,” “darkness and light,” and “sleep and waking up.” We usually go to bed at night when it is dark. The coming of light indicates the passing of night and the beginning of a new day. The coming of the dawn is an indication that it is time to wake up, get up, and get about the deeds of the new day. Put on the correct clothes as Colossians 3:5-17 reminds us.

Believers are to wake up from spiritual lethargy and love their neighbors while they have opportunity to do so. There is less time to serve the Lord now than there was when we were first saved. There is no time to waste! Paul reminds us of our initial salvation and of the coming day of our full salvation to stir us up to love and good deeds.

The key to doing so is vs. 14 “*put on the Lord Jesus Christ*”. Positively we need to draw on his strength, align our thoughts with his mind-set, and yield our wills to his revealed plan. Negatively we should “*make no provision for the flesh in regards to its lusts*”. We all find that there are certain people, places, activities or situations that promote sin in our lives making it easier for us to yield to temptation. Knowing this we should do whatever is possible to avoid them.

Conclusion

Romans 13 began with important teaching about how we can be good citizens (1–7) and good neighbors (8–10); it ends with why we should be (11–14). There is no greater incentive to the doing of these duties than a lively expectation of the Lord’s return. We will be rightly related to the state (which is God’s minister) and to the law (which is fulfilled in loving our neighbor) only when we are rightly related to the day of Christ’s coming.

Stott: *That day is steadily approaching. Our calling is to live in the light of it, to behave in the continuing night as if the day had dawned, to enjoy the ‘now already’ of the inaugurated kingdom in the certain knowledge that what is still ‘not yet’, namely the consummated kingdom, will soon arrive.* (The Message of Romans, pg. 354)