



CITIZENS

Believers should seek to represent Christ well in their communities and world.

ROMANS 13:1-14

Our view of the government often depends on our current circumstances. At tax season, some may feel the government is too intrusive. When a police officer stops someone for speeding, the complaint may be, “Don’t they have anything better to do?” In Romans 13, Paul dealt with the believer’s relationship to governing authorities. He called for submission to authority, balancing government’s God-given right to rule with our submission to God, who alone holds absolute authority.

***How would you describe your relationship with local government?
What do you value the most in your local government?***

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

ROMANS 13:1-14

After highlighting behavior within the church in chapter 12, Paul turned his attention to how believers should interact with those outside the church. While we are citizens of heaven, we also live as citizens of earth (Rom. 13:1-14). As such, we have a responsibility to respect our leaders and to make our community a better place. If we abdicate our duty to be a light to the world, the darkness will dominate with no one to blame but ourselves.

This challenge to live as upright citizens on earth is rooted in the truth that Christ will return. We do not know the day, so we live each day as if that is the day He is coming back. Such an attitude will protect us from straying too far from His commands, in addition to showing the world what it means to truly live for Him. As Paul noted, we should live as children of the day, not as agents of darkness (13:11-14).

Read Romans 13:1-14 in your Bible, circling the actions Paul identified believers were to take. How are the actions circled a means of representing Christ well?

EXPLORE THE TEXT

SUBMIT (ROM. 13:1-7)

¹ Let everyone submit to the governing authorities, since there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are instituted by God. ² So then, the one who resists the authority is opposing God's command, and those who oppose it will bring judgment on themselves. ³ For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have its approval. ⁴ For it is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, because it does not carry the sword for no reason. For it is God's servant, an

avenger that brings wrath on the one who does wrong.⁵ Therefore, you must submit, not only because of wrath but also because of your conscience.⁶ And for this reason you pay taxes, since the authorities are God's servants, continually attending to these tasks.⁷ Pay your obligations to everyone: taxes to those you owe taxes, tolls to those you owe tolls, respect to those you owe respect, and honor to those you owe honor.

VERSES 1-2

Paul addressed Christian citizenship with a command and a rationale. First, he said to ***submit to the governing authorities***. The Greek phrase is an imperative. As Paul would explain later, obeying authorities is tied to obeying God.

The authorities in Rome were pagans. But Paul did not distinguish between evil leaders and righteous leaders. Christians are called to honor all leaders—as long as it doesn't compromise the faith.

The rationale for submission to governing authorities is God's sovereignty over human affairs. Whether leaders acknowledge it or not, none of them hold their position ***except from God***. Jesus reminded Pilate of this truth while standing trial (John 19:11). Likewise, all of their authority has been ***instituted by God***.

Since God places individuals in authority, rejecting their authority amounts to opposing God's command. While many leaders don't claim allegiance to God, the majority of society's laws still serve the greater good. We may not agree with every decision, but we are still called to live in a way that honors God.

Those who disobey human law will face the consequences—probably at the hands of the authorities they have snubbed. Paul said that such individuals ***will bring judgment on themselves***. Our faith as believers does not give us the freedom to flaunt the legal system.

Of course, at some point, we may be forced to choose between the rules of society and the principles of God. For example, God may lead us to take a stand against injustice in some form. In those cases, we still are subject to the law and must endure the repercussions of our choices. Paul and the Romans certainly understood this truth, having suffered for faith on numerous occasions.

VERSES 3-4

The best way to avoid the consequences of breaking the law is to avoid breaking the law. It seems simple, but that is the gist of Paul's message. In general, leaders are *not a terror to good conduct*.

In Acts, John and Peter did take a stand against the authorities in Jerusalem. They twice confessed allegiance to God over the unjust laws of their culture (Acts 4:19; 5:29). However, this represents the exception rather than the rule. In most cases, individuals have no reason to fear authority.

Our first loyalty should be to God, and our primary aim should be to please Him.

Our first loyalty should be to God, and our primary aim should be to please Him. In most cases, that does not keep us from doing what's right according to earthly laws. So Paul instructed his readers to *do what is good*.

God has established leaders for the *good* of those who do what is right—including believers. In His grand scheme, they are God's servants to dispense justice in the world.

The *sword* was a symbol of power and judgment. Under God's authority, governments carry a sword to punish those who create chaos—when appropriate force is necessary. Where injustice exists, God expects the governing authority to be an avenger that defends the weak and moves quickly to make things right. Christians support such efforts. Of course, this does not work perfectly in every setting. History reveals many leaders who were more of a problem than a solution. But ideally, good government protects the innocent and punishes the guilty.

How might a believer show respect to government leaders even when they disagree with government leaders?

VERSES 5-7

There is more to honoring government than simply avoiding punishment. While that may be a genuine deterrent, Christians also need to consider their *conscience*. Disobedience creates guilt, and believers are called to walk in freedom from guilt. So, honoring



the laws of society allows us to sleep soundly at night in addition to escaping judgment. Doing right comes with such rewards.

Paul made it clear that paying **taxes** was not up for debate. Christians show respect for the government by paying all taxes that are due. Jesus taught the same thing. When a group of leaders tried to trick Him with a question about taxes, He pointed out the image of Caesar on the coin used to pay those taxes. He famously told listeners to give Caesar what he was due and to give God what He deserved (Matt. 22:15-22).

KEY DOCTRINE: *Religious Liberty*

Civil government being ordained of God, it is the duty of Christians to render loyal obedience thereto in all things not contrary to the revealed will of God (1 Pet. 3:11-17).

LOVE (ROM. 13:8-10)

⁸ Do not owe anyone anything, except to love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. ⁹ The commandments, Do not commit adultery; do not murder; do not steal; do not covet; and any other commandment, are summed up by this commandment: Love your neighbor as yourself. ¹⁰ Love does no wrong to a neighbor. Love, therefore, is the fulfillment of the law.

VERSES 8-10

Beyond taxes owed to government, Paul pointed to a larger debt believers owe—to **love one another**. Unlike financial debts, the debt of love never expires. We are always under an obligation to others. Like honoring the authorities, loving others nurtures a spirit of peace and protects the church's larger mission.

Paul used the Ten Commandments to illustrate the relationship between love and the law. Sins like **adultery, murder**, theft, and coveting are caused by selfishness, which is the opposite of sacrificial love. What God expects can be summed up in a single principle: **Love your neighbor as yourself**. (See also Lev. 19:18; Matt. 22:34-40; Gal. 5:13-15; and Jas. 2:8.)

Those who practice love well place their own desires on hold for the benefit of others. Our natural tendency is to advance our own agendas, even if it hurts others in the process. Paul emphasized that *love does no wrong* to others. By doing no wrong, we put others first. This represents the ultimate *fulfillment of the law*.

Jesus taught the same truth with the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). As He noted, neighbors are not defined by geography or ethnicity. Instead, our neighbors are anyone we can help. As a result, our love should extend as far as God's love—to the entire world (John 3:16). We love because He first loved us (1 John 4:19), and we reflect Him to the world through our love.

Loving others is a common theme in the New Testament. In John's Gospel, Jesus said His followers would be known by their love (John 13:34-35), and the early church members worked to live that out in practical ways (Acts 4:32-35). Later, Paul told the Corinthians that love treats others well (1 Cor. 13:4-7). Likewise, John (1 John 3:18) and Peter (1 Pet. 4:8) each encouraged genuine love among early Christians. We must learn to love others well.

How does keeping the commandments listed by Paul demonstrate love for others?

ANTICIPATE (ROM. 13:11-14)

¹¹ Besides this, since you know the time, it is already the hour for you to wake up from sleep, because now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed. ¹² The night is nearly over, and the day is near; so let us discard the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. ¹³ Let us walk with decency, as in the daytime: not in carousing and drunkenness; not in sexual impurity and promiscuity; not in quarreling and jealousy. ¹⁴ But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and don't make plans to gratify the desires of the flesh.

VERSES 11-14

Paul often filtered his teaching through the second coming of Christ. He did the same when it came to citizenship. How we



act as citizens of earth should be determined by our citizenship in heaven.

Paul didn't know when Jesus would return, but he was confident that the time was coming. Because Jesus is coming back, the Romans needed to wake up and act like it. Biblical reminders of Christ's return typically include accompanying challenges for moral purity and spiritual awareness.

We are on the clock, and we will give an account for our time.

While two thousand years have passed, each day moves us closer to His return. As Paul wrote, the completion of our salvation is *nearer than when we first believed*. We are on the clock, and we will give an account for our time.

How does thinking about Jesus' return serve as motivation for believers to make a difference today?

Paul used *night* and *day* to contrast the *darkness* of the world and the *light* of faith. (See also 1 Thess. 5:4-11; Eph. 5:1-20.) Here, he reminded his readers that the dark culture was on borrowed time. Before long, the sun would rise, and a new day would dawn.

In the midst of darkness, Paul challenged the Romans to serve as lights to their community. The first step in this process was to *discard the deeds of darkness*. Christ had already redeemed them from that lifestyle; they didn't need to go back to it. The alternative was to *put on the armor of light*. Armor equips warriors for battle, and God's armor of light equips believers to illuminate darkness while we wait for Jesus' return. Paul expanded on the benefits of God's armor in his Letter to the Ephesians. (See Eph. 6:10-18.)

As believers put on God's armor, they are empowered to live in purity and beyond reproach. Paul compared the way we live to a *walk*. It's an appropriate comparison, since life really is a journey that moves each of us closer to eternity. We must walk *with decency*. This means our lives can stand up to the most intense scrutiny of those around us. We may stumble, but our hearts should also be set on what is good (Phil. 4:8).

Such a lifestyle stands in stark contrast to the world's standard of living. Paul gave some examples of how culture lives without a moral compass. People often use *carousing and drunkenness* to deaden their pain, while they rely on *sexual impurity and promiscuity* to substitute for genuine intimacy. While Christians are identified by love, the world tears itself apart with *quarreling and jealousy*.

The only cure for this cycle of emptiness is Jesus. Those who put on *the Lord Jesus Christ* discover healing, community, and hope. Instead of becoming slaves to the desires of the flesh, Christ frees them to be all they were created to be.

The issue comes back to submission. By submitting all we are to God, we will be in fellowship with Him and be a light to those around us.

How can a believer shed light in a dark world and do so with love? Are there inappropriate ways of being light in a dark world? Explain.

BIBLE SKILL: *Use multiple Scripture passages to understand a major doctrine.*

Paul used the phrase “put on” to describe the activity of Christians (Rom. 13:12,14). Read the following passages to gain deeper insight into what Paul was telling Christians to do: Ephesians 6:11-18; 1 Thessalonians 5:8; Galatians 3:27; Ephesians 4:24; Colossians 3:10. How do these passages help us understand Paul’s commands in Romans 13? Read 1 Corinthians 15:53-54. How does it differ from the other passages you have read?



IN MY CONTEXT

- Believers should honor their government and its leaders by being model citizens.
- Believers should demonstrate Christlike love to all people, especially other Christians.
- Believers should live holy lives in anticipation of the return of Christ.

What are some things you and the members of your Bible study group do to make your community a better place? How can you be a light by ministering to your leaders?

Who are some people you struggle to love? How can you learn to love them better? What are some practical ways you can show God's love this week to the people you listed?

Identify some dark places around you that need Christ's light. How can you represent Christ in those areas? What holds you back? How can you overcome those barriers?

Prayer Needs
