

David Guzik :: Study Guide for Romans 13

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A Christian's Obligation to Government

A. The Christian and government.

1. ([Rom 13:1-2](#)) Government's legitimate authority and the Christian's response.

Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves.

a. **Subject to the governing authorities:** The connection between [Romans 12](#) and [Romans 13](#) is clear. If the Christian is not to seek personal vengeance, it does not take away the government's authority to punish wrongdoers.

b. **Every soul** certainly includes Christians. Paul simply says that we should be **subject** to the governing authorities. This was in contrast to groups of zealous Jews in that day who recognized no king but God and paid taxes to no one but God.

c. **For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God :** We subject ourselves to governing authorities because they are appointed by God and serve a purpose in His plan.

i. **No authority except from God:** God appoints a nation's leaders, but not always to *bless* the people. Sometimes it is to judge the people or to ripen the nation for judgment.

ii. We remember that Paul wrote this during the reign of the Roman Empire. It was no democracy, and no special friend to Christians - yet he still saw their legitimate authority.

iii. "Remember your Savior suffered under Pontius Pilate, one of the worst Roman governors Judea ever had; and Paul under Nero, the worst Roman Emperor. And neither our Lord nor His Apostle denied or reviled the 'authority!'" (Newell)

d. **Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God :** Since governments have authority from God, we are bound to obey them - unless, of course, they order us to do something in contradiction to God's law. Then, we are commanded to obey God before man (as in [Acts 4:19](#)).

e. **Those who resist will bring judgment on themselves:** God uses governing authorities as a check upon man's sinful desires and tendencies. Government can be an effective tool in resisting the effects of man's fallenness.

2. ([Rom 13:3-4](#)) The job of government: to punish and deter evildoers.

For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to *execute* wrath on him who practices evil.

a. **Do what is good, and you will have praise :** Paul's idea is that Christians should be the best citizens of all. Even though they are loyal to God before they are loyal to the state Christians are good citizens because they are honest, give no trouble to the state, pay their taxes, and - most importantly - pray for the state and the rulers.

b. **He is God's minister:** Paul describes government officials as **God's minister**. They have a ministry in the plan and administration of God, just as much as church leaders do.

i. If the state's rulers are **God's minister** (servant), they should remember that they are *only* servants, and not gods themselves.

c. **An avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil**: It is through the just punishment of evil that government serves its function in God's plan of holding man's sinful tendencies in check. When a government fails to do this consistently, it opens itself up to God's judgment and correction.

d. **He does not bear the sword in vain**: **The sword** is a reference to capital punishment. In the Roman Empire, criminals were typically executed by beheading with a **sword** (crucifixion was reserved for the worst criminals of the lowest classes). Paul, speaking by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, has no doubt that the state has the legitimate authority to execute criminals.

3. ([Rom 13:5-7](#)) The Christian's responsibility towards government.

Therefore *you* must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience' sake. For because of this you also pay taxes, for they are God's ministers attending continually to this very thing. Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes *are due*, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor.

a. **Therefore you must be subject**: We must be subject to government; not only because we fear punishment, but because we know it is right before God to do so.

i. **For conscience sake**: Christian obedience to the state is never blind - it obeys with the eyes of conscience wide open.

b. **You also pay taxes ... Render therefore to all their due**: We are also to pay the taxes **due** from us, because there is a sense in which we support *God's work* when we do so.

i. By implication, [Romans 13:6](#) also says that the taxes collected are to be used by government to get the job done of restraining evil and keeping an orderly society - not to enrich the government officials themselves.

c. **Taxes ... customs ... fear ... honor**: We are to give to the state the money, honor, and proper reverence which are due to the state, all the while reserving our right to give to God that which is due to God alone. ([Matthew 22:21](#))

d. In light of this, is rebellion against government ever justified? If a citizen has a choice between two governments, it is right to choose and to promote the one that is most legitimate in God's eyes - the one which will best fulfill God's purpose for governments.

i. As well, in a democracy, we must understand that there is a sense in which we *are* the government, and should not hesitate to help "govern" our democracy through our participation in the democratic process.

B. The Christian's obligation to his neighbors.

1. ([Rom 13:8-10](#)) The obligation to love.

Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, "You shall not commit adultery," "You shall not murder," "You shall not steal," "You shall not bear false witness," "You shall not covet," and if *there is* any other commandment, are *all* summed up in this saying, namely, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love *is* the fulfillment of the law.

a. **Owe no one anything except to love one another**: On a personal level, the only "debt" we are to carry is the "debt" to love one another - this is a perpetual obligation we carry both before God and each other.

i. Some take this as a command to never borrow, but Jesus permitted borrowing in passages like [Matthew 5:42](#).

That isn't the sense of what Paul is saying here, though the Scriptures do remind us of the danger and obligations of borrowing ([Proverbs 22:7](#)).

ii. "We may pay our taxes and be quit. We may give respect and honor where they are due and have no further obligation. But we can never say, 'I have done all the loving I need to do.' Love then is a permanent obligation, a debt impossible to discharge." (Morris)

b. **You shall love your neighbor as yourself:** Paul echoes Jesus' words as recorded in [Matthew 22:36-40](#). This is one of the two commands upon which *hang all the Law and the Prophets*.

i. **Love your neighbor** means to love the people you actually meet with and deal with every day. It is easy for us to love in the theoretical and the abstract, but God demands that we love *real* people.

ii. "No man can compass the ends of life by drawing a little line around himself upon the ground. No man can fulfill his calling as a Christian by seeking the welfare of his wife and family only, for these are only a sort of greater self." (Spurgeon)

c. **Love is the fulfillment of the law:** It is easy to do all the right religious "things" but to neglect love. Our love is the true measure of our obedience to God.

2. ([Rom 13:11-14](#)) The urgency to love and walk right with God.

And *do* this, knowing the time, that now *it is* high time to awake out of sleep; for now our salvation *is* nearer than when we *first* believed. The night is far spent, the day is at hand. Therefore let us cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light. Let us walk properly, as in the day, not in revelry and drunkenness, not in lewdness and lust, not in strife and envy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to *fulfill its* lusts.

a. **The night is far spent, the day is at hand:** Because we know the danger of the times and we anticipate the soon return of Jesus, we should be all the more energetic and committed to a *right* walk with God instead of a *sleep-walk* with God.

i. How important it is to **awake out of sleep!** We can do many Christian things and essentially be asleep towards God. What a difference it makes when we are **awake!**

- We can speak when we are awake
- We can hear when we are awake
- We can walk when we are awake
- We can sing when we are awake
- We can think when we are awake

b. **Cast off the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light:** The illustration is from taking off and putting on clothes. When you get dressed every day, you dress appropriately to who you are and what you plan to do. Therefore, everyday, **put on the Lord Jesus Christ!**

i. We must **cast off** before we can **put on**. "The rags of sin must come off if we put on the robe of Christ. There must be a taking away of the love of sin, there must be a renouncing of the practices and habits of sin, or else a man cannot be a, Christian. It will be an idle attempt to try and wear religion as a sort of celestial overall over the top of old sins." (Spurgeon)

c. The **works of darkness** are characterized as **revelry and drunkenness, licentiousness and lewdness, strife and envy**. These are not appropriate for Christians who have come out of the night into God's light.

i. The idea behind the word for **licentiousness** is "the desire for a forbidden bed." It describes the person who sets

no value on sexual purity and fidelity.

ii. **Lewdness** has the idea of a man who is lost to shame. They no longer care what people think and flaunt their sin openly, even proudly.

d. The **armor of light** is related to **the Lord Jesus Christ** Himself. When we put on Christ, we put on all the armor of God and are equipped to both defend and attack.

i. "*Putting on Christ* is a strong and vivid metaphor. It means more than *put on the character of the Lord Jesus Christ*, signifying rather *Let Jesus Christ Himself be the armor that you wear.*" (Morris)

e. Yet, we are still called to **make no provision for the flesh**. We have a work to do in **walking properly, as in the day** - it isn't as if Jesus does it *for* us as we sit back; instead, He does it *through* us as we willingly and actively partner with Him.

f. God used this passage to show Augustine, the great theologian of the early church, that he really *could* live the Christian life as empowered by the Holy Spirit - he just had to *do it*. And so do we.

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