

## Romans 13:1-14

### Introduction

This text has given scholars consternation for years, so much so that some scholars deny Pauline authorship of these verses. The more traditional view is that this is instruction to the church about their relationship with the Roman governmental authorities. It is relatively easy for people who live in a democracy with the freedoms Americans have traditionally had to see this text as a simple text that just says we are to be good citizens. Taken at face value, there would be no just reason to oppose a cruel tyrant. How could Paul say of the Roman government that rulers are “not a terror to good conduct” or that citizens will only receive the approval of the rulers if they do good (13:3) when we know that is not true? Taken for instance the case of Daniel and his three friends or horrible atrocities we have known in modern times.

While it is true that many other texts speak of God as the authority behind those who have political power, no other texts have such positive uncritical remarks about governmental authorities. Daniel 2:21 says that God sets up kings but it also says he deposes them and Daniel directed harsh words toward Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 4). Assyria and Babylon did God’s bidding in punishing Israel and Jerusalem but the prophets always gave warnings and threats of punishment if they went too far with their cruelty (Isa. 10:24-27; 13:1ff). Here there is no such warning about rulers being subject to God’s judgment or about any conflict between God and this world as in 2 Cor. 4:4 or Gal. 1:4, and certainly not anything close to what is seen in Revelation. There is nothing close to what is said in Wisdom 6:4-5. “Because as servants of his kingdom you did not rule rightly, or keep the law, or walk according to the purpose of God, he will come upon you terribly and swiftly, because severe judgment falls on those in high places.”

It is important to remember the context of Romans and in particular that of chapters 9-11. Paul has been revealing the mystery concerning God’s work among both Jews and Gentiles to fulfill His promise to Abraham that He would bless the world. For a period of time God worked in a particular way with Israel. But Paul lived in a time when God had hardened or thrown a stumbling rock in the path of some in Israel. This curious event led to the reconciliation of the world, which involved bringing Gentiles into covenant relationship with God without going through Torah or Jewish rituals. There will be a time when Gentiles reach their “fullness” and God will bring His mercy upon once hardened Israel and bring about their fullness. During the meantime Gentiles are not to become arrogant thinking their acceptance and Israel’s rejection means God has permanently rejected Israel. It needs to be remembered that the main thrust of chapter 11 is how Christ-followers were to view hardened Israel in a more positive light for the sake of God’s purposes for them. Gentiles were to be a tool of God’s to reach hardened Israel. As stated in chapter 12 comments, chapters 12-15 speak to the relationship between Christians (primarily Gentiles but including Jews) and hardened Israel. God-fearing Gentile Christ-followers were to stay connected to the synagogue community in order to have a positive relationship with hardened in hopes hardened Israel would come to see the validity of the gospel through them.

Note: Verses 1-5 lead up to the focus of this discussion, which is paying taxes.

### **Living Under Another's Authority: 13:1-7**

#### *Living Under Roman Authority*

If this text is talking about living under the authority of the Roman government with the focus on preserving the relationship primarily between god-fearing Gentile Christians and hardened Israel, Paul's intent may be in line with the following comments. Jews in the Roman empire were at times given privileges, not being required to serve in the military and they were given special temple tax considerations because of their support of Augustus against Mark Antony. Although Rome did not officially have a target painted on Jews, they had a watchful eye on any foreign cults like Judaism. There was often regional discontent with Jews from their Gentile neighbors regarding some of their privileges that resulted in violence at times. For example, in response to civil unrest between Greeks and Jews in Alexandria, Egypt due to special temple tax privileges, Claudius sent a letter instructing both Greeks and Jews to live peaceably. One thing Rome would not tolerate was any kind of uprising or disturbance among its citizens. Law and order was highly prized by Rome. Because of such disturbances, Rome had expelled Jews from Rome in 19 CE under Tiberius and in 49 CE under Claudius (Acts 18:2). It is not known the percentage of Jews who were expelled. It is surmised by some that a few years later many returned to Rome, at which time Christianity had emerged among the god-fearing Gentiles. The return of Jews to Rome and the existence of Gentile Christians (most if not all formerly godfearers) added to the potential conflict between Christ-following Jews and god-fearing Gentiles, and unbelieving Jews.

During these early years of the church, Christians were not seen by Rome as a distinct group from unbelieving Jews but were seen as a subgroup of Judaism much like the Essenes, etc. If conflict arose between the two groups not only would it harm relationships between Christians and unbelieving Jews, it might also catch Rome's attention. If the conflict was big enough it might even lead to another expulsion. This would make it next to impossible for Christians to have a positive influence on non-Christ-following Jews. Therefore, Christians needed to "keep their heads down" in relation to Rome so that Rome would not have a reason to engage with them in a way that would harm God's desire for them to interact positively with non-Christ-following Jews.

Drawing on the teaching of Jesus, they were to pay taxes to whom taxes were due (Matt. 22:21). Taxes were not only repulsive to Jews; many in Roman society were opposed to the exorbitant taxes. The Jewish community, which would have included Jew or Gentile Christians as far as Rome was concerned, could give Rome an excuse to expel them again if they rioted against taxes. Protecting oneself from even unfair practices does not trump doing the will of God, which in this case was living in such a way as to stay positively connected to unbelieving Jews in order to be a positive influence on them as regards the gospel.

### *Living Under Synagogue Authority*

There is another much less common view that may better fit the context of Romans. There are no specific words in the text that identify the “authorities” or “rulers” as Roman authorities, or as government; although many interpreters assume this refers to Roman officials. The Greek text of 13:1 literally reads, “superior authorities,” and “encompasses a range of officials placed in superior positions of authority, duly appointed to their tasks, and currently exercising their power.”<sup>1</sup> Many assume this text is parallel to statements in 1 Peter 3. There you have the phrase “every human institution” (v. 13) and the word “governors” (v. 14), which seems to specifically point to Roman authorities. Such phrases or words are not found in the Romans text.

The words “authorities” and “rulers” respectively are used in the NT of Chief Priests (Acts 9:14; 26:10,12) and synagogue rulers (Luke 8:41; Acts 3:17; 4:5). All the other words and phrases in Romans 13 could be used in connection to synagogue officials. Interpreters are reluctant to identify the authorities as synagogue rulers because of the phrase, “bear the sword.” The word “sword” refers to a dagger or short-sword, as would be used in performing circumcision. Sword may be used here metaphorically (as in other places although for different purposes: Eph. 6:7; Heb. 4:12), for the disciplinary function of synagogue authorities. It is easier to see the synagogues having God given authority and being called “God’s servants,” than it is to see the Roman government being called servants of God. Both had rejected Messiah. At least the synagogue officials recognized the one true God. From a modern perspective, it is troubling to view Adolph Hitler (and other tyrant dictators) as servants of God.

The power of synagogue rulers can be seen in Paul’s life as a persecutor of the Way and as a Christ-follower. Based on their understanding of Torah, synagogue rulers could remove Gentiles from the synagogue if they refused to adopt proper behavior, including the payment of temple taxes. They would praise good behavior and punish deviations from Torah. Paul’s exhortation (taxes to whom taxes are due) could have been for Gentile Christ-followers to pay taxes to both the temple authorities and to Rome (13:7). There was also concern among Jews that Gentiles would claim to be godfearers just for the special privileges Jews received from the Roman government, including tax privileges. For Gentiles Christ-followers to disrespect the synagogue leaders by their behaviors or refusal to pay temple taxes would be contrary to a mind transformed to discern the will of God (12:1-2). What is said in this chapter needs to be connected to 12:18 (“So far as it depends on you, live peaceable with all”), which also leads into chapter 14.

### **Owe Only Love: 13:8-10**

If this text talks about submitting to Rome, rioting over taxes, or attempts to withhold taxes would cause the Jewish community (Christians and unbelieving Jews) to be known for owing the government. Jews would also be able to blame Christians for any problems from Rome that would come as a result of attempts at avoiding taxes.

---

<sup>1</sup> Robert Jewett, *Romans: a Commentary*, Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007, 788.

If this text talks about submitting to the synagogue officials, Christians were to owe nothing to the synagogue and its leaders except love. Love in this case means paying your taxes and living in peace (12:18). In a real sense it was the Gentiles who were indebted to the synagogue. It was through Israel that Christ came into the world bringing God's righteousness to Gentiles. The only connection Gentiles had to scripture was through the synagogue and the teaching they obtained there.

The identifying mark of God's people is to owe only love. "By this all men will know you are my disciples if you love one another (John 13:35). God obligated Himself to love His creation and His people cannot legitimately do any different, even when that includes hardened Israel. A major part of Israel's problem as identified by Paul is that they did not understand the intent of Torah. Jesus exposed the same problem in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7). Lives that are discerning of the will of God (12:1-2) understand there is a deeper intent of the law than just not committing adultery, stealing, or killing. Every command has love at its core. You don't refuse to pay taxes just to avoid trouble from Rome or as a sign of disrespect for hardened Israel. You pay taxes so you can live in harmony with others, in this case hardened Israel, for their benefit. To do anything for personal reasons that could draw the ire of Rome and keep Christians from being in a loving relationship with hardened Israel (as long as it was up to the believer) would be unloving toward the neighbor (hardened Israel). Love fulfills the intent of Torah.

#### **Live With The End In Sight: 13:11-14**

As was seen earlier in Romans, there was a "before" time during the age of Adam and the "now" time of the age of Christ (3:21). The phrase "now is the moment" gives Paul's statement a sense of urgency. If their minds have been transformed to discern the will of God (12:2), they will have a sense of urgency in their lives as they long for the return of Jesus. This is the opposite of "sleep." In this kind of context sleep had a negative connotation in both Greek philosophy as well as in Jewish literature (Prov. 6:4, 9). Although still living in the body, there is to be a constant anticipation for the end when Christ returns which is transforming in one's life.

Jews, even believers in Jesus, remained concerned about Gentile immorality. In Ephesians, Paul challenges the immoral tendencies of Gentiles who had come directly out of paganism. In order to fulfill God's intent for Gentile Christ-followers, it was important that hardened Israel see the transformation that the gospel claimed came through the Spirit of Christ to all people. To practice ungodly behavior would have cemented the disparaging stereotype and compromised their witness to persuadable Jews.

This discussion of an honorable life could also come into play in regards to Rome's suspicion of any religious cults and Jews suspicion of Gentile godfearers or now Gentile Christ-followers. Worshipers of the Greek god of wine and sex, Bacchus, engaged in all sorts of lascivious behavior, including nocturnal orgies. Rome became so concerned about their behaviors that they did an extensive investigation that led to destroying all their meeting places and forbidding them from celebrating their rites unless taken before the senate for approval. Even if permission were given, they would not be allowed to assemble with more than five persons, with no more than two men or

three women, and had to do so with a presiding official.<sup>2</sup> It is probable that if Christians and unbelieving Jews were ever overheard in their house gatherings arguing and disturbing the peace, it would have been reported to the authorities leading to some kind of sanction against their assemblies. Any such disturbance would make it almost impossible for the Christians to stay connected with hardened Israel.

This focus on “quarreling and jealousy” probably also had a connection to the overall social life of Rome. Often dinner parties among pagans were for the purpose of solidifying or increasing one’s status in society. If Christians living among hardened Jews were to use their assemblies for the purpose of promoting their social status, it would destroy relationships. This will be a major focus of chapters 14-15.

## **Conclusion**

### *Rome As The Authority*

Rome always kept an eye on cultic groups like Jews with a concern that their behavior might lead to civil unrest. The Roman government did not see Christians as distinct from Jews, so if a disturbance arose among them, Rome would step in to squelch the situation, which could possibly even lead to another expulsion of Jews from Rome. The most important consequence would be the inability for Christians to have a positive relationship and influence with hardened Israel, which Paul considered to be a priority of God. Not only did Jews often oppose Roman taxes, this was true of Greeks as well. If within the Christian/Jewish community there were to be a revolt against taxes, it would gain the attention of Rome, which again would lead to a bad situation. Christians were not to engage in activities that hindered the relationship between themselves and hardened Israel. The only obligation they were to ever have toward others is love.

### *Synagogue Leaders As The Authority*

Jews kept their eyes on Gentiles who claimed to follow Yahweh. If God’s intent was for Christ-following Gentiles to live peaceably with hardened Israel in the synagogue setting, they had to respect synagogue officials and pay temple taxes. Their lives were to honor God in their daily living. To do different would discredit the gospel in the eyes of hardened Israel.

It is easy to get caught up the affairs of every day life and forget the big picture. Some had grown lax in having any sense of urgency in regards to living in such a way that was in anticipation of the return of Christ. Having such urgency should lead Gentile Christians to want to throw off their old ways of living. This would not be only for their benefit, but would also impact how hardened Israel would view the legitimacy of Christianity.

This specific teaching on subjection to authorities is not for all places and all situations. If we are to place this text within the context of Romans, this text has

---

<sup>2</sup> Livy, *History of Rome*, Book XXXIX, (<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/livy39.html>)

particular application to Christian/hardened Israel relationships. That is not to say that there are not some general principles that can apply to other settings. We are to live in the world as ministers of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18-19). There may be reasons at times to stand against a tyrannical government. Never should such action be seen from Christians unless it is clearly within the will of God and unless it aids rather than hinders the perception of Christ in the minds of the outside world. Never are Christ-followers to engage in debauchery, quarreling, or jealousy. Such is foreign to the nature of God and Christ. Sacrificial love is always the foundation principle that must guide our actions regardless of the response we might receive, even from fellow believers.

**Romans**  
**13:1-14**

1. How do you make sense of the completely positive position Paul took here if this text is discussing secular governments?
2. Do any of the statements concerning secular governments give you difficulty? If so, which ones? How might you make sense of them?
3. How can this text apply to the discussion of relationships between Jew and Gentile Christ-followers and hardened Israel?
4. What application is there for Christian behavior in any circumstance?