



MAIN COMMENTARIES ON 'ROMANS'

Chapter 13

The early church in Rome faced significant political and social pressure: riots amongst Jews over Christian evangelism resulted in all Jews being expelled from Rome from 49-54 AD, while the activities of the Zealots in Palestine generated further ill will against Judaism (of which the Romans at the time saw Christianity as a sect).

Given the intense emotions - and even violence - between Jews and Romans at the time, how could Christians follow St. Paul's exhortation to "live peaceably with all men" (Romans 12:18)? How could the early Christians convince Rome that they were not a threat to the political system? St. Paul addresses these questions in Romans 13:1-7.

Before looking at St. Paul's teaching about Christians and governments, we should note that St. Paul is addressing the need for Christians to be law-abiding citizens under a generally good government. Fr. Lawrence Farley explains,

(Romans 13:1-7) deals only with the basic Christian commitment to be good and law-abiding citizens and to avoid anarchic treason. The vexed question of what to do under an evil regime with its evil laws is not in view here. It is a misapplication of St. Paul's thought to read this as if it dealt with the question of whether civil disobedience or a coup d'etat is ever allowed.

St. Paul begins by stating that Christians must be obedient to governing authorities, because God has appointed these authorities (Romans 13:1). This means that rebelling against such duly appointed authorities is in effect a rebellion against the God Who is responsible for their position (13:2). The fourth century Christian Ambrosiaster succinctly states that "Paul bears witness to the fact that...the ministers of the earthly law have God's permission to act, so that no one should despise it as a merely human construction." The fact that God installs governmental rulers to prevent societal anarchy, St. John Chrysostom confirms, "is the work of God's wisdom."

St. John Chrysostom further confirms that St. Paul intended not only to instruct the Christians in proper societal behavior, but also to convince the Roman authorities that Christians were not a threat to be destroyed:

In saying this, Paul was more likely to draw civil governors who were unbelievers to accept the Christian faith and to persuade believers to obey them. For it was commonly rumored in those days that the apostles were guilty of plotting sedition and revolution, aiming in all that they did and said at the subversion of the received institutions. However, when we see that Christ's command is that we should obey all the authorities, all rumors of this kind will be shown to be false.

In Romans 13:3-4, St. Paul explains the central purpose of a good government: to uphold a stable, beneficial social order, and to punish individuals who engage in acts of evil. In fact, when a governmental official fulfills this duty, he or she “is God’s minister to you for good” (13:4). When a person engages in evil, however, then the governmental official is “God’s minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil” (13:4). Christians therefore only need to fear good government when they engage in evil, law-breaking activities (13:3, 4). Ultimately, Christians do not obey governmental regulations because we fear punishment for violating the law: we obey the government “for conscience’ sake” (Romans 13:5).

This understanding of governments’ role in upholding order is also related to the Christian hope that the government will uphold and protect the place and activity of the Church in society. This hope is expressed in a prayer from the Liturgy of St. Basil:

Remember, Lord, this country and all those in public service whom You have allowed to govern on earth. Grant them profound and lasting peace. Speak to their hearts good things concerning Your church and all Your people that through the faithful conduct of their duties we may live peaceful and serene lives in all piety and holiness.

Because Christians obey higher authorities because of their role in God’s plan for the world, we must give to them those things - both money and respect - that are their due. Christians therefore pay taxes in order to fund the authorities’ God-ordained activities (Romans 13:6; see Matthew 22:15-22; Mark 12:13-17; Luke 20:20-26). Fr. Lawrence Farley explains that Christians further give “custom” or other taxes to those with the authority to collect money from citizens, “fear” (or, as St. John Chrysostom phrases it, “very great honor”) to high-ranking authorities who can punish wrongdoers, and “honor” to lower-ranking authorities who cannot punish wrongdoers but nonetheless deserve respect for their position and work (Romans 13:7).

St. Irenaeus of Lyons writes in the second century about the importance of a good government in maintaining order:

God imposed upon mankind the fear of man, for mankind did not acknowledge the fear of God. So He did this in order that, being subjected to the authority of men, and kept under restraint by their laws, mankind might obtain some degree of justice. They might exercise mutual forbearance through dread of the sword...Earthly rule, therefore, has been appointed by God for the benefit of nations...This is so that under the fear of human rulers, men may not eat each other up like fishes. Rather, through the establishment of laws, men may keep down an excess of wickedness among the nations. Considered from this point of view, those who exact tribute from us are ‘God’s ministers attending continually to this very thing’ (Romans 13:6).

St. Paul summarizes his teaching in Romans chapters twelve and thirteen with one word: love. All the commandments - against adultery, murder, theft, lying, greed, etc. - are summed up in the words, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Romans 13:9; see Exodus 20:13-17; Deuteronomy 5:17-21; Matthew 19:16-18; Mark 12:28-34). A Christian who truly loves others will be able to live peaceably with them, because love is the fulfillment of the Law (Romans 13:10). To say that love fulfills the Law means, according to Fr. Lawrence Farley, that “all that the Law contains, all its life-giving teaching and power, is

in love. If one has love, one has all the reality contained in the Law. That is why the one who loves has already fulfilled the Law's inner demands."

Christians should live in love with the full knowledge that the time of Christ's Second Coming is inexorably drawing nearer (Romans 13:11). Since the moment in which you first believed in God and His promises, the time of Christ's return has continually drawn closer. Because this time draws closer, St. Paul encourages you to "wake out of sleep," which the Church Fathers understand to mean ceasing a life of sloth and spiritual indifference and working to grow in love and holiness.

The night of this sinful age has almost passed, and soon the new day - in which Christ will renew the world - will arrive (Romans 13:12). In preparation for this new day, Christians should cease all sinful works of darkness and instead "put on the armor of light" (13:12), which can be linked to the command to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ" (13:14). Christians should reject such sinful works of the flesh as revelry and drunkenness, lewdness and lust, and strife and envy (13:13) - all those things which prevent us from living peaceably with others - and instead submit to Christ's authority in our lives.

St. John Chrysostom explains what it means to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ:"

(St. Paul) gives us the Lord Himself for a garment, the King Himself: for he that is clad with Him, hath absolutely all virtue. But in saying, 'Put ye on,' he bids us be girt about with Him upon every side. As in another place he says, 'But if Christ be in you' (Romans 8:10). And again, 'That Christ may dwell in the inner man' (Ephesians 3:16. 17). For He would have our soul to be a dwelling for Himself, and Himself to be laid round about us as a garment, that He may be unto us all things both from within and from without. For He is our fullness; for He is 'the fullness of Him that filleth all in all' (Ephesians 1:23).