

# UNIT 24—Submission to the Authorities/Romans 13:1-7



## TEXT

### *Submission to the Authorities*

**13** Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. <sup>2</sup>Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. <sup>3</sup>For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. <sup>4</sup>For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. <sup>5</sup>Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience.

<sup>6</sup>This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. <sup>7</sup>Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.

## STUDY

### READ

#### First Reading/First Impressions

How do you feel about Paul from this passage?

☐ He's wrapped in the Roman flag. ☐ He's politically naive. ☐ He's a responsible citizen.

#### Second Reading/Big Idea

The major question that this passage raises in my mind is:

### SEARCH

1. How does Paul justify his general principle for relating to government? (v. 1)

2. How might misunderstanding what freedom in Christ means make this section necessary?

3. What might happen if the Roman Christians ignored this teaching? (See summary in the notes.)

4. What can you learn from here about a civil government's...

origin?

power?

purpose?

5. In what ways is government to be "God's servant"?

(v. 4a)

(v. 4b)

(v. 6)

### APPLY

In light of a government's purpose (vv. 3-4), how might Paul advise Christians in a modern democracy to live as "living sacrifices" to God?

Since "we the people" are the government in a democracy, what grade would you give yourself in influencing the government to "do right"? A B C D F Why?

In what way might you try to bring that influence to bear now?

Some Christians feel political involvement is to be avoided as worldly, while others view it as a major arena for discipleship. Which is closest to your view? Why?

## GROUP AGENDA

Divide into groups of 4 before starting on these questions. Follow the time recommendations.

### TO BEGIN/10 minutes (Choose 1 or 2)

☐ Who holds the record in our group for the most traffic tickets? ☐ Did you ever get in trouble with the authorities in school? ☐ What did you put down for READ?

### TO GO DEEPER/20 minutes (Choose 2 or 3)

☐ Go around and answer the questions under SEARCH—one person answering question 1, the next person answering 2, etc. ☐ How does this passage relate to the previous passage, especially 12:9-21? ☐ How do you resolve Paul's statement in 10:9—"if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus (NOT Caesar) is Lord'"—with Paul's teaching here? ☐ Why is Paul so concerned about Christians submitting to authorities? ☐ What one qualification does Paul hint at in verse 5? ☐ Case History: The school board has ruled that no religious organizations can hold meetings on school property. At the same time the board approves the dissemination of contraceptives without parental consent. What's your response?

### TO CLOSE/5-20 minutes (Choose 1 or 2)

☐ What did you write under APPLY? ☐ Where do you draw the line on submitting to authorities? On what biblical principles? ☐ What should Christians do who live in an oppressive, totalitarian state? ☐ How do Paul's principles apply to us living in a democratic political system?

# NOTES ON ROMANS 13:1-7

**Summary/Romans 13:1-7.** Paul's concern is how Christians relate to those outside the church. The general principles in 12:17-21 (e.g., don't resort to violence to "get even") are now given specific focus in this discussion of the relationship of Christians to civil authorities.

Historical conditions must be remembered, lest one understands this text to teach more than it does. In Paul's day Rome was clearly a restraining force against chaos. Furthermore, it was crucial that Christians be seen as good citizens and not be expelled from Rome as had the Jews because of a riot some years earlier (probably occasioned by Christ being preached in the synagogue).

Note, too, that Paul does not deal with the question of how Christians relate to a government gone sour, just as in Romans he doesn't tell Christians how to relate to an apostate church. Nor does he give any guidance as to how Christians should involve themselves in a participatory democracy. This was a *specific* word to *particular* Christians in a given era. Care must be taken in making twentieth century applications, especially since in Revelation 13:18 Rome is pictured as having fallen under the control of evil (Revelation 13:7) and Christians must then relate to it quite differently.

- v. 1 **Everyone** . . . i.e., every Christian in Rome, no one is exempt.

**submit** . . . this word is sometimes mistranslated "obey" (there are three Greek words for obedience). Submission must be understood in light of 12:10 (honoring others above oneself) and Philippians 2:3f. (counting others as better); i.e., Christians must recognize the claim that the authorities have upon them. But see also Acts 5:29. "Peter and the other apostles replied: 'We must obey

God rather than men!' " See also Mark 12:13-17.

- vv. 3-4 Paul is not discussing governments that are unjust and which punish good works and praise evil.

- v. 4 **good** . . . "the ruler helps the Christian toward 'the good' which God has in store for him, toward salvation (we take it that it is salvation to which, mainly at any rate 'the good' in this verse refers), if he is a just ruler, by providing him with encouragement to do good and discouragement from doing evil, . . . and by curbing the worst excesses of other men's sinfulness and providing them with selfish reasons for acting justly. . . ." (Cranfield)

- v. 5 **conscience** . . . since the Christian knows that the ruler has been appointed by God, to *not obey* would create a guilty conscience.

- v. 7 **taxes** . . . local taxes such as duty, import/export taxes, taxes for the use of roads or for the right to drive a cart, etc.

**revenue** . . . any tribute, paid by members of a subject nation to Rome, consisting usually of three types: a general tax on agricultural produce; a 1% income tax, and a poll tax paid by everyone between the ages of 14 and 65.

# COMMENTS

## The Roman Empire

The existence of the Roman Empire proved in many ways beneficial to the early church. Apart from anything else, the fact of the so-called *pax Romana* (Roman peace) made it possible for Christianity to spread far quicker and far more widely than in more tumultuous times.

Origen, the early church father wrote: "It is quite clear that Jesus was born under the reign of Augustus, the one who reduced to uniformity, so to speak, the many kingdoms on earth so that he had a single empire. It would have hindered Jesus's teaching from being spread through the whole world if there had been many kingdoms, not only for the reasons just stated, but also because men everywhere would have been compelled to do military service and fight in defence of their own land. This used to happen before the times of Augustus. Accordingly, how could this teaching which preaches peace and does not even allow men to take vengeance on their enemies, have had any success unless the international situation had everywhere been changed and a milder spirit prevailed at the advent of Jesus?"

Central to this spread of Christianity was the existence of the fine system of roads radiating out from Rome and extending across the Empire. While designed primarily for the rapid movement of armies, their roads also facilitated the rapid spread of news and made it possible for early missionaries to journey far and wide in comparative safety.

This was an unusual time. Never before in history had so much of the world been at peace and under the control of one power. Nor would this condition last.

Furthermore, up until the time of Nero's reign, Christianity was considered a novel foreign (Jewish) "superstition" brought to Rome by the uneducated lower classes and as

such was largely ignored. However in A.D. 64 Nero set fire to Rome and then blamed the Christians for it, thus introducing the church to an era of martyrdom.

As Michael Green wrote: "The spread of Christianity would have been inconceivable had Jesus been born half a century earlier. As it was, the new faith entered the world at a time of peace unparalleled in history." He goes on to say that "probably no period in the history of the world was better suited to receive the infant Church than the first century A.D., when, under one Empire which was literally world-wide, the scope for the spread and understanding of the faith was "enormous" (*Evangelism in the Early Church*).

## Roman Taxes

The vast and complex apparatus of the Roman Empire was financed by a series of taxes. These included *customs duties* which were collected at various sites along the major roads and in the ports. These were a one percent *sales tax*, a five percent *tax on inheritances* of Roman citizens, and a five percent tax paid when *slaves* were set free.

There was also a tax levied on personal property and land for everyone who lived outside Italy.

So-called provincial taxes were collected indirectly by the Romans. Rome sold the right to collect these taxes to individuals (the so-called "publicans") who often formed companies made up of shareholders. These companies then went about actually collecting the taxes, charging as much as they could, so that after paying what was due Rome, they would have a healthy profit. Needless to say this form of taxation was not popular! Abuses were many and tax collectors (like Matthew) were hated.

There is a clear sense here and in other early

Christian writings that Christians ought to pay for the services and benefits they receive from government. Justin Martyr wrote: "Everywhere, we, more readily than all men, endeavour to pay to those appointed by you the taxes, both ordinary and extraordinary, as we have been taught by Jesus. We worship only God, but in other things we will gladly serve you, acknowledging you as kings and rulers of men, and praying that, with your kingly power, you may be found to possess also sound judgment."