



Politics and Purity

Lesson 17 | Romans 13

Have you ever heard that someone was “so heavenly minded they were no earthly good?” People who say this worry that if people spend too much time thinking about eternity, they will stop caring about the present world. Yet when the gospel is properly understood, it not only focuses our attention on the future but also makes us more effective here on earth. A right understanding of the gospel will have a very big impact on relationships with others, and in this lesson we will look at two ways that the gospel should transform our behavior: when dealing with the government and when dealing with a carnal world.

In what ways is it true that being “too heavenly minded” can make you “no earthly good”?

In what ways is it wrong that being “too heavenly minded” can make you “no earthly good”?

Paul started off in chapter 12 calling on believers to live a sacrificial life (12:1-2). He then showed what the would look like as they served with their gifts in the church (12:3-8) and as they allowed the gospel to impact their relationships with one another (12:9-21). In Romans 13 Paul deals with two different yet somewhat related topics: politics (13:1-7) and purity (13:8-14). In this chapter of Romans we see how Christians should interact with a government that is often hostile to them, and how Christians should respond to the out-of-control sinful lifestyle of the culture around them. The first issue deals with fear – we ought to fear the government because we fear God. The second issue deals with love – we ought to love others because we love God.

Christians Should Be Submissive (1-7)

Paul begins this chapter by dealing with the question of politics. This would have been an especially important issue for the church at Rome because Rome was the capital city of, well, Rome! Imagine if someone today wrote a letter to Christians living in Washington D.C. Not surprisingly, political issues were pretty dicey for the church in Rome. Historians tell us that the emperor Claudius kicked all the Jews out of the city around A.D. 49-50 (cf Acts 18:1-2), and some of this may have been because of agitation about Jesus.¹ It would seem by this time that Jews had been allowed back into the city once again (cf Romans 16:3), but you can imagine there were some not nice feelings toward the government. In response to this situation, Paul wants to make sure the Christians are thinking rightly about those who rule over them.

¹ The lengthiest defense of this position is in *Paul's Early Period: Chronology, Mission Strategy, Theology* by Rainer Riesner, pages 157-201.

How do you think the Jewish Christians living in Rome would have felt about the Roman government?

How do you think the Gentile Christians living in Rome would have felt about the Roman government?

How might this parallel current Christian attitudes about the government?

The Origin of Government (1-2)

If we're going to think rightly about government, we need to start with where government began. Paul makes some statements that might have surprised some of the Christians in Rome (and some Christians today). He demands that they be subject to higher powers, to the government, because God designated who those authorities would be. This means that if we resist the government, we are resisting God Himself.

What about when crooked, corrupt, power-hungry leaders end up ruling?

What is perhaps most surprising about all this, though, is that Paul is not just generically saying that God created the idea of government, which He most certainly did. But God also ordained the leaders themselves to rule. He says that "the powers [i.e. the rulers] that be are ordained of God" (Romans 13:1). What's perhaps most surprising about all of this is that while Paul is writing this letter to Rome in the late 50's, the emperor sitting on the throne is Nero (reigned 37-68). Although Nero had not yet begun his persecution of Christians, the Holy Spirit knew that was coming when He inspired Paul to pen these words. That meant that God told the Roman Christians to submit to Nero, knowing full well that Nero would soon be persecuting the church.

Can you think of any other biblical examples of bad leaders that God ordained?

The Purpose of Government (3-4)

So why would God give us government in the first place? If every government is corrupt to some extent, why not just leave people to themselves? Paul goes on to explain that no matter how bad a government might be, God's purpose for government is good and understanding that purpose can help us when we don't exactly feel like listening. We saw earlier that God ordains, not just governments, but the rulers in those governments. Here Paul twice says that those rulers are a servant of God (13:4). In other words, when government tell us what to do they are speaking on behalf of God and are carrying out His will.

How can a wicked ruler (such as Nero) who has rejected God be said to be a servant of God?

God gave governments the responsibility to punish wrongdoing and to promote righteousness. Every government does this to some extent, even if the government itself has major problems. Situations where anarchy reigns don't tend to last for long, because most people soon realize that a tyrant is better than no ruler at all. None of this is meant to excuse corruption or evil on the part of a government. God will ultimately hold everyone accountable for the authority that He gave them. But it does mean that as believers we have an obligation to obey the government whenever possible.

What happens if a government begins rewarding evil and punishing good?

Are there any biblical principles for when we should not obey the government?

The Responsibility to Government (5-7)

So if God instituted not just the government, but the leaders themselves, and if the purpose of the government is to enforce justice, then how should believers respond? Paul gives one general response

along with two specific ways this should be applied. First, we are all called upon to be subject unto higher authorities (13:5). Simply put, we must submit to the government. If we don't, we will face wrath, likely a reference to God's wrath, and we will damage our conscience by going against the rightful authorities that God has placed in our lives.

Why is it so hard for people, including Christian, to submit to the government?

Paul goes on to remind the believers in Rome that they needed to pay taxes. Then as now, people weren't thrilled to pay taxes, especially if they didn't like where all of that tax money went. Remember, first century Christians paid taxes to fund the Roman armies, some of which were occupying their homelands! Yet even Jesus himself noted the importance of paying taxes to the Roman government, going so far as to say that tax money was "the things which are Caesar's" (Matthew 15:15-22).

Not only are we supposed to pay taxes, but we are also supposed to show fear and honor to those to whom it is due. Those who have been placed in authority over us have been placed there by God, and God expects us to show honor and fear to our leaders. Christians should be some of the most progovernment people on the planet. Not in the sense that we expect the government to fix all our problems – it can't. Not in the sense that we don't think the government won't ever do wrong – it most certainly will. But if we take seriously what Paul is saying here, the government should find that as a whole Christians are the most respectful, submissive, and dutiful citizens they have.

What are some ways that we as Americans can show honor and reverence to our elected officials, even the ones we don't like?

Christians Should Be Pure (8-14)

Paul is concerned about Christians responding rightly to outsiders in the political realm, but he's also concerned about the possibility that the sinful lifestyle of those who don't know Christ will continue to have a pull on young (and old) believers. As we will see, the way the world lives is characterized by debauchery, immorality, and fighting. God's call to love as He has loved means that we will follow His law carefully, and all the more seeing how quickly history is racing toward its end.

The Centrality of Love (8-10)

Paul states that our fundamental duty to one another is to love one another. He goes on to argue that all of God's laws in one form or another are a way of practically showing love for others. After listing several of the ten commandments, he argues that fulfilling these is how we practically show love to others. What Paul is teaching here is what Jesus meant when he said that "on these two commands [love God and love others] hang all the law and the prophets [i.e., the Old Testament]." This is important because it shows us that God's commands are not simply some arbitrary list of abstract rules but that they are very closely connected to love: love for Him and love for other people.

How does realizing that God's laws are the way He desires us to show love to one another change the way we think about such laws?

The Need of the Hour (11-12)

God's law is the practical outworking of loving others. That's what Jesus taught, and that's what Paul echoes. But the need to follow God's law and love others is all the more urgent because of the current situation in the world right now. Paul says that the fulfillment of the promise of our salvation is getting

closer and closer,² and the hope of Christ's imminent return should motivate holy living. The current era is described as "night," but as a night that is quickly coming to an end. When we realize that Christ's kingdom is coming, and all the sin and wickedness around us will be brought to a dramatic end, it ought to motivate us to live rightly.

How does realizing that Christ could return soon change the way we think about sinful behavior?

The Practicalities of Living Rightly (13-14)

In this final section, Paul gets down to some of the nitty-gritty of what needs to change in our lives as we seek to live for God. He calls on us to put off "rioting and drunkenness," or basically to put away the party lifestyle as we might call it today. Next, he warns against "chambering and wantonness" which deals with sensuality and sexual immorality. Finally, he calls on believers to get rid of "strife and envying," or fighting and jealousy. These terms describe many people living in the world totally opposed to God and His Word. All these activities are the opposite of love, and yet they follow the natural tendency of our own sinful hearts.

What are some ways these sins manifest themselves believers' lives, even if they look less dramatic than when unbelievers do them?

Paul then gives us a two-step procedure for living rightly in a crazy world. The first is to put on the Lord Jesus Christ. This means that we think like He did, that we look to Him for guidance, wisdom, and spiritual strength. It means we recognize that "without me ye can do nothing" (John 15:5). We will never live holy and faithful lives in our own power, we need the strength of Christ.

What do you think it looks like to put on Jesus Christ? How can you practically do this tomorrow?

But secondly, Paul told us to "make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill the lusts thereof." We need to be careful that we don't put ourselves in situations where our sinful flesh will have the opportunity to carry out its sinful impulses. This involves coming up with practical and careful guidelines to keep us from sin. We must not confuse these standards with holiness, and we should never develop an air of superiority over someone else because of such self-imposed standards. But what Paul is calling for here is common sense – we should take care that we avoid the temptation to be involved in the kinds of sins Paul has in mind since we know how prone our flesh is to give in to such sin. One preacher summed this passage up well when he said that our goal should be to "make it hard to sin and easy to do right."

What are some ways that believers can make it "hard to sin and easy to do right"?

Living in the world means that we must interact with people in the world, and two very important issues face the believer attempting to live rightly in any culture. First, how should we respond to the government, especially when we don't like it and when it's not fair? Second, how should we live in the face of a world where immorality, substance abuse, and anger are commonly accepted parts of life? Jesus gave clear commands on these issues, and Paul echoes them here. We must be willing to respect and submit to government, and we must seek to love one another by following God's laws. In doing this

² We often think of our salvation as a past event, we *were* saved. Scripture does talk this way about our salvation (Romans 8:24; Ephesians 2:8-10), but it also describes our salvation as a future event, we *will be* saved from God's wrath on the final day (Romans 5:9; 12:11).

we will stand out noticeably from the world around us and will demonstrate that we are living sacrifices to God whose minds are being renewed by the gospel, rather than shaped by the culture.

Which do you think Christians today struggle with more – rightly responding to the government or rightly responding to a corrupted culture?