THE CHRISTIAN’S RELATIONSHIP WITH THE GOVERNMENT

The Christian’s relationship with the civil government is complicated. On the one hand, we understand that God established the authorities that exist, and we should be subject to them (Romans 13:1). On the other hand, the Roman government treated Christians in Rome like sheep for the slaughter (Romans 8:35, 36). Paul had to remind the early believers to seek their persecutors’ good despite their persecution (Romans 12:18). Rather than inciting rebellion and vengeance, they were to trust in the future judgment of God and, in the meantime, seek to overcome evil with good (Romans 12:19, 21).

The Christian’s relationship with the civil government is complicated because we hold competing beliefs in tension. For example, our theology is rooted in the legal tradition of the Old Testament. Thus we believe in the rule of law. We also believe in a God who superintends history (Job 12:19; Psalm 75:6, 7; Daniel 2:21). Additionally, Christians are familiar with the prophets who were critics of corrupt rulers throughout the Old Testament (Micah 3:9). So how should we synchronize these principles and relate to civil governments? We should be as submissive to civil government as we possibly can without compromising our loyalty to God. This means that we should pay our taxes and customs and communicate respect and honor to our officials (Romans 13:7). Nothing in Scripture prevents us from fulfilling these minimum responsibilities. More than that, we should far exceed the minimums by generous acts of love (Romans 13:8).
Write out Romans 13 from the Bible translation of your choice. If you are pressed for time, write out Romans 13:8–14. You may also rewrite the passage in your own words, or outline or mind-map the chapter.
Historically, religion has been deeply embedded in civic life. It has been used as a tool to facilitate unity within the nation. For example, after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the United States was thrust into World War II. During that time, the song, “Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition” became very popular. This song isn’t an expression of pure devotion to Jesus. It is an expression of American civil religion and served a unifying purpose. In the English civil war, Oliver Cromwell told his troops, “Trust in God and keep your powder dry.” This similarly conveyed the sentiments of the civil religion of England.

Civil religion served a unifying role in ancient Rome. The Romans believed that the correct performance of the sacrificial and cultic rituals ensured peace with gods and the success and prosperity of the empire. All members of the society were required to engage in these rituals. The rituals involved worship of the Roman gods and the emperor. The only legal way to avoid Roman worship was for a religion to be granted legal status. Judaism was considered a legal religion by the Romans. As they were part of a legal religion, Jews were exempted from participating in the pagan Roman worship. Christianity wasn’t considered a legal religion until A.D. 313. That meant, before that date, Christians were constantly confronted with the religious requirements of the civil religion of Rome. If they refused to participate, then they would be accused of displeasing the gods and of putting the entire society at risk of the gods’ displeasure. This was a challenging circumstance for the early Christians to face. They would want to be good citizens and cooperate as much as possible with the empire, but they couldn’t compromise their convictions by worshiping false gods.

Against this backdrop, Paul urges the Roman Christians to “do what is good” (Romans 13:3). Paul argues that it is hard for the civil authorities to bring harm to those who work for the good of society. In fact, if we are a force for good, then the civil authorities will praise rather than punish us (Romans 13:3).

The authorities’ proper role is to serve as God’s minister for good and to bring judgment upon those who do evil (Romans 15:4). By living lives that are full of good, Christians may make it possible to receive praise from the civil authorities even when they refuse to participate in the civil religion.

In what ways has religion been embedded in our culture? Does this help or hurt the Christian witness?

Memorize your favorite verse in Romans 13. Write it out multiple times to help with memorization.

Read more at www.inversebible.org/rom11-3
Though the Ten Commandments are an essential expression of God’s moral nature, they are not the pinnacle of morality. The highest expression of morality isn’t found in what we don’t do. Instead, it is found in what we do. A corpse can’t violate the Ten Commandments. A dead man can’t commit adultery, kill, bear false witness, or covet. The dead can’t worship false gods, bow down to idols, misuse God’s name, or break the Sabbath. If our standard of morality is limited to the Ten Commandments, then our standard is low enough for a corpse to meet. The Ten Commandments are a necessary moral minimum. Christians are not satisfied with the minimum. They pursue the moral maximum, which is love. The one who loves has fulfilled the law (Romans 13:8).

Love fulfills the law, but doing the law doesn’t necessarily fulfill love. For example, someone may avoid killing, stealing, or adultery out of fear of punishment. In this way, they have carried out the demands of the law but haven’t met the higher standard of love. Love always fulfills the law. If we love, we certainly won’t commit adultery, murder, steal, bear false witness, or covet. More than that, love fulfills the law because love will lead us to care for our neighbors in heartfelt ways. Do they need food? Love will feed them. Do they need clothing and shelter? Love will seek to meet the need. Do they need comfort in sorrow? Love will empathize.

Rather than seeking only to avoid certain behaviors, love actively seeks the good of those around us. Love is our ongoing responsibility. According to Paul, it is as though we are in debt, and the only way we can discharge it is by extending love (Romans 13:8).

As Christians, through love we will meet the minimum standard of the law by avoiding gross violations of the Ten Commandments. More than that, we will passionately pursue love by genuinely caring for our neighbors and community.

Paul’s exhortation to pursue love is in the context of being good citizens (Romans 13:1–10). This is why Paul only mentions the last five of the Ten Commandments (Romans 13:9; Exodus 20:1–17). The civil government’s authority only extends to the commandments that govern our relationships with one another. Civil governments have no jurisdiction over the worship behavior outlined in the first four commandments. Believers have no responsibility to civil governments if they require obedience in matters of worship.
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What relationship do the following verses have with the primary passage?

Exodus 20:1–17
Proverbs 21:1
Matthew 22:35–40
1 Peter 2:13–17

What other verses come to mind about civil and spiritual obedience?

Review your memorized verse from Romans 13.
WAKE UP

Even the early Christians could get sleepy and neglectful of their spiritual life. Human nature hasn’t changed, and we can fall into the same stupor. We can be lulled to sleep by getting caught up in the daily routines of life or the pleasures of the world. Paul reminds the Roman Christians that it is time to wake up and stop neglecting their spiritual life (Romans 13:11). This isn’t something to be taken lightly, to neglect or put off. The second coming of Jesus is nearer than when we first believed (Romans 13:11). By saying this, Paul isn’t suggesting that the second coming was necessarily imminent in his day. According to Jesus, no one knows the day or the hour (Matthew 24:36). By saying that salvation is nearer than when we first believed, Paul is expressing the reality that every day is one day nearer to the second coming of Jesus.

Since every day we are one day nearer to the coming of Jesus, it is urgently important to make sure that we are not being lulled to sleep by the world. Each day increases the urgency of the call to cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light (Romans 13:12). As we await the return of our Lord, we are to walk as if it were daytime. That is, we are to avoid the evil works of the night, things like revelry, drunkenness, sexual immorality, strife, and envy (Romans 13:13).

We are to clothe ourselves with Jesus and not make any provision for the fulfillment of the lusts of the flesh (Romans 13:14). To clothe ourselves with Jesus means to fully appropriate the reality of Jesus into our lives. It means to shape our life around the reality of His life. We can only do this if we regularly spend time in God’s word, seeking to understand how Jesus lived His life.

Part of shaping our life around the life of Jesus is to avoid making provision for the lusts of the flesh. This is a frank acknowledgment that the flesh will still desire to be fulfilled. We Must. Resist. We do this by refusing to make provision for the lust of the flesh. Do you have a problem with internet pornography? Stop making provision for the flesh and share your browsing history with a trusted friend. Do you struggle with an addiction? Resolutely determine to remove the substance from your life. You can’t drink alcohol if there isn’t alcohol to drink. Do you stumble in a particular environment? You may need to avoid that environment altogether. “Put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts” (Romans 13:14).
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Review the memory verse.
How does it apply to your life this week?

After this week’s study of the chapter, what applications are you convicted of in your personal life?

What are applications you can make in your social, public, and/or civic life?

CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

“The principle for which the disciples stood so fearlessly when, in answer to the command not to speak any more in the name of Jesus, they declared, ‘Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye,’ is the same that the adherents of the gospel struggled to maintain in the days of the Reformation. When in 1529 the German princes assembled at the Diet of Spires, there was presented the emperor’s decree restricting religious liberty, and prohibiting all further dissemination of the reformed doctrines. It seemed that the hope of the world was about to be crushed out. Would the princes accept the decree? Should the light of the gospel be shut out from the multitudes still in darkness? Mighty issues for the world were at stake. Those who had accepted the reformed faith met together, and their unanimous decision was, ‘Let us reject this decree. In matters of conscience the majority has no power.’”—Merle d’Aubigne, History of the Reformation, b. 13, ch. 5.

“This principle we in our day are firmly to maintain. The banner of truth and religious liberty held aloft by the founders of the gospel church and by God’s witnesses during the centuries that have passed since then, has, in this last conflict, been committed to our hands. The responsibility for this great gift rests with those whom God has blessed with a knowledge of His Word. We are to receive this Word as supreme authority. We are to recognize human government as an ordinance of divine appointment, and teach obedience to it as a sacred duty, within its legitimate sphere. But when its claims conflict with the claims of God, we must obey God rather than men. God’s Word must be recognized as above all human legislation. A ‘Thus saith the Lord’ is not to be set aside for a ‘Thus saith the church’ or a ‘Thus saith the state.’ The crown of Christ is to be lifted above the diadems of earthly potentates.

“We are not required to defy authorities. Our words, whether spoken or written, should be carefully considered, lest we place ourselves on record as uttering that which would make us appear antagonistic to law and order. We are not to say or do anything that would unnecessarily close up our way. We are to go forward in Christ’s name, advocating the truths committed to us. If we are forbidden by men to do this work, then we may say, as did the apostles, ‘Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard.’”

Share insights from this week’s memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.

How should we honor our government officials when we disagree with their policies?

What have you found helps wake you up when you find yourself falling into a spiritual sleep?

When are there circumstances when we should reject the government’s authority?

What does it mean to you to make no provision for the lust of the flesh?

What would happen to the Christian witness if we made a serious commitment to doing good in the world?

In what ways do you see religious liberty under attack in your country?

How can you be an advocate for religious liberty?