

Authority: Belonging to God

Devotional Reading: Proverbs 31:4–9

Background Scripture: Mark 12:17; Romans 13:1, 6–8; 1 Peter 2:13–17

Today's Scripture: Mark 12:17; Romans 13:1, 6–8; 1 Peter 2:13–17

I. Teaching on Authority

Mark 12:17

17 And Jesus answering said unto them, Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's. And they marvelled at him.

17. The conflict here is prompted by the question of whether or not it is “lawful to give tribute to Caesar” (Mark 12:14). Jesus’ questioners are the Pharisees and Herodians (12:13). Although these groups do not typically work together, in this case, they both desire to discredit Jesus no matter how He responds. If Jesus answers *yes*, the Pharisees can say Jesus violates the Law of Moses. If He answers *no*, the Herodians—whose power comes from Rome—can charge Him with treason.

Jesus answers by requesting a coin. After His opponents verify Caesar’s image on it, Jesus directs them to *render to Caesar* what is due him. Using the coin recognizes Caesar’s earthly authority and the benefits they receive from Caesar’s civil government. One may consider here the advantages that empires provide like military order, safe roads, and superior buildings. With the enjoyment of these assets comes a certain obligation. Then Jesus continues, the people are also to give *to God* the things owed Him. Believers owe God honor, respect, obedience, and worship.

Despite His opponents’ attempt to trick Him, Jesus answers with all wisdom and grace. His answer gives Roman listeners no room to claim that Christ-followers are disloyal to the state. God’s people are responsible for their earthly citizenship as well as their heavenly citizenship.

II. Tribute to Authority

Romans 13:1, 6–8

1 Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God.

6 For for this cause pay ye tribute also: for they are God’s ministers, attending continually upon this very thing.

7 Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honour to whom honour.

8 Owe no man any thing, but to love one another: for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law.

1. Paul addresses how believers should relate to earthly authorities. To be *subject unto* means to be ranked under another. We are to submit because *God* ordains all earthly *powers*. Just prior to this directive, Paul stresses the importance of believers living peaceably among themselves and

under government (Romans 12:9–21). The thoughts in this verse are a logical extension of those requirements.

Yet Paul is not demanding total obedience to the whims of every evil or tyrannical ruler. The primary decision is whether the directives of an earthly ruler conflict with the directives of God. Paul was beaten and imprisoned multiple times for allegedly unlawful conduct. When the commands of human authorities conflicted with his duties as God's servant, Paul obeyed God. An even clearer example of this concept is the response of Peter and the other apostles to the Sanhedrin in Acts 5:29: "We ought to obey God rather than men."

6. The double *for* may be considered "this is also" or "for because." It sets up Paul's reasoning. To find the antecedent of *this cause*, we look to the verses just before the one at hand. Paul states that governing powers serve the populace by upholding "good" behavior and punishing "evil" (Romans 13:3–4). Then he appeals to the reader's conscience (13:5). Since the governing authorities are *God's ministers*, then shouldn't one's conscience require that they be supported? The fact that they do their jobs on a full-time basis (the sense of *attending continually upon this very thing*) further buttresses Paul's line of thought.

Tribute refers to taxes. In any era, taxes feel like (and are) a burden. The extortion committed by corrupt tax collectors in the first century did not help. Despite the injustice of imperial taxation, Paul invites his audience to view paying their taxes not just as a legal obligation but as a moral one as well. A primary element of God's bestowal of authority on local and national leaders is to maintain peace, safety, and order.

The Greek word translated *ministers* is different from the word translated "minister" twice in Romans 13:4. In the ear-

lier two instances, the word is the source of our word *deacon*. But the word here rendered as "ministers" only sometimes refers to those devoted to religious service. In the New Testament, the term also describes someone who performs duties toward others for the sake of the Lord (Philippians 2:25; Hebrews 1:7, 14; 8:2; 10:11; etc.). It leans toward those committed to civic good, as in "public servants."

7. The big picture here concerns how to act on one's debts (which is the sense of the word *dues*). Paul approaches this topic in terms of four categories. The first is *tribute*, which refers to direct taxes. The second category is *custom*, which relates to custom duties and fees, or what may be called indirect taxes. Secular authorities require taxes to function.

Leadership positions deserve the deference inherent in the words *fear* and *honour*, the last two categories. Throughout the Bible, the word describes the holy awe one experiences in the presence of God or His miraculous work. *Honour* refers more generally to the respect given to others, whether political leaders, parents, spouses, widows, or God.

8. This verse is connected to the previous seven by the concept of obligation. Paul expands believers' responsibility beyond the political and secular realms. The only debt not to be paid off that aligns with God's kingdom is the commitment to *love one another*. The requirement to love one another renews continually, with every encounter.

Paul uses both *one another* and *another*. Some commentators argue that the debt of *love* is owed only to fellow believers, as consistent with Paul's use of the phrase "one another" in other writings. But the second half of this verse indicates we are to love people in general. This matches Jesus' parable of the good Samaritan. Believers are called to a wide target of love.

III. Submission to Authority

1 Peter 2:13–17

13 Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake: whether it be to the king, as supreme;

14 Or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well.

15 For so is the will of God, that with well doing ye may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men:

16 As free, and not using your liberty for a cloke of maliciousness, but as the servants of God.

17 Honour all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the king.

13. Writing from Rome, Peter calls believers to respectful citizenship. His directive is truly remarkable, given the persecution by Nero at the time. Even so, Peter emphasizes the authority of governmental directives by stating that the people should obey *every ordinance*. But such submission is not absolute. Peter makes this clear when he explains his act of civil disobedience in Acts 5:29.

As believers follow the laws of the earthly kingdoms in which they reside, their submission will be *for the Lord's sake*. Peter explains how as he continues.

13b–14. Following the general instruction of the previous half-verse, Peter names two offices of earthly authority. First, the *king, as supreme* refers to whoever rules as the overarching authority. As Peter writes, that person is Nero in Rome. Second, *governors* are regional managers. During Peter's time, governors oversaw all the minor Roman provinces. Judean governors mentioned in the New Testament are Pilate (Matthew 27:2, 11; Luke 3:1), Felix (Acts 23:24–26), and Festus (24:27; 26:32).

A primary task of government is pro-

tecting the innocent from *evildoers*. A congenial by-product of living a law-abiding life is the resulting *praise of them that do well*. Such praise is not a primary goal to be sought, however; rather, it is a desirable by-product that reflects well on God. Peter thus calls believers to consider how their behavior serves as a witness of God to an unbelieving world. God's reputation is at stake! This matches what Jesus says in Matthew 10:18.

15. Peter appeals to God's *will* to stress that believers are to be models of proper living. Naysayers of the Christian faith accused Jesus and His followers of sedition and hostility. By living in ways that benefit their fellow citizens, Christ-followers *silence* false accusations. Their careful submission to civil authority aids the church's mission and protects the faithful. Peter assumes an overlap between the moral framework of believers and their presence within society.

16. This verse calls to mind what might be called a "spectrum of behavior." At one extreme end of the spectrum stands "Legalism," which stresses rule-keeping as the model behavior that best reflects on God. This position is refuted by Acts 15:1; Galatians 5:3; Colossians 2:20–23; etc. At the other extreme end of the spectrum stands "License." This position as the model of behavior is refuted by Galatians 5:13; 2 Peter 2:19; etc. The proper view stands midway between the two extremes. It is called "Liberty." *Liberty* is affirmed by John 8:34; Romans 6:14; 14:1–6; 2 Corinthians 3:17; Galatians 2:4; 5:1–13; etc.

17. Peter concludes with a series of short exhortations. The four statements summarize the previous verses. Give honor to everyone, extend extravagant love to fellow believers, direct awe and reverence to God, and esteem governmental leaders.

