

ROMANS 13 — LIVING UNDER GOD'S KINGDOM: LOVE, AUTHORITY, AND ETHICS

Through the lens of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Paul's Kingdom theology.

I. Living Under God's Order — The Call to Submission (Romans 13:1–7)

Romans 13:1–7 (NIV)

1 Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established.

The authorities that exist have been established by God.

2 Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves.

3 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 you will be commended.

4 For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.

5 Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience.

6 This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing.

7 Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes,

pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.

Paul reminds believers that order itself is a reflection of God's creative will. Bonhoeffer writes in Ethics, 'The powers that be are not ultimate but penultimate; yet even in their limitation, they stand under God's command for the preservation of the world.'

Submission is not blind obedience but trust in God's governance beyond human imperfection. Obedience to civil authority is part of obedience to God—so long as it does not replace allegiance to Christ.

Philippians 3:20 (NIV)

But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Acts 5:29 (NIV)

Peter and the other apostles replied: 'We must obey God rather than human beings!'

Galatians 1:10 (NIV)

"Am I now trying to win the approval of human beings, or of God? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ."

The believer lives in tension—loyal to earthly order, but ultimately bound to the eternal Kingdom.

II. Love Fulfills the Law — The Ethic of Christ (Romans 13:8–10)

Romans 13:8–10 (NIV)

8 Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law.

9 The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery,” “You shall not murder,” “You shall not steal,” “You shall not covet,” and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

10 Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.

Paul’s ethic transcends law and politics—love is the final authority. Bonhoeffer said, 'The commandment of love is not an ideal to be realized, but a divine reality in which we already live.'

Philippians 2:3 (NIV)

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves.

Galatians 5:13 (NIV)

You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love.

Love transforms obedience from duty to delight. We reveal God’s Kingdom not through argument or control, but through sacrificial love.

III. The Day Is Near — Awaken to Kingdom Reality (Romans 13:11–14)

Romans 13:11–14 (NIV)

11 And do this, understanding the present time: The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.

12 The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light.

13 Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy.

14 Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh.

Paul writes as one who lives between two ages—the old world fading, the new Kingdom dawning. Bonhoeffer viewed ethics as responsible action in this in-between time: 'The Christian does not flee the world, but acts within it as one already redeemed.'

Colossians 1:13 (NIV)

For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves.

Galatians 5:22–23 (NIV)

22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,

23 gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.

Colossians 3:3 (NIV)

For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.

2 Corinthians 5:20 (NIV)

We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.

To live ethically is to live awake, aware that Christ's return draws near. The believer's identity is not in political allegiance or social status but in union with Christ.

IV. Bonhoeffer's Vision — The Church as Kingdom Witness

Bonhoeffer wrote, 'The Church is the Church only when it exists for others.' The Church does not rule the state but reminds it of its limits.

Philippians 2:14–15 (NIV)

Do everything without grumbling or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, "children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation." Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky.

The Church witnesses to the higher authority of Christ, not by withdrawal, but by faithful presence. Allegiance to Christ reorders every human relationship: submission becomes service; freedom becomes faithfulness; love becomes law.

V. BREAKOUT QUESTIONS

ROMANS 13:1-7

1. How can we live faithfully under earthly authority while maintaining allegiance to God's Kingdom?

ROMANS 13:8-10

2. What does it look like to 'owe nothing except love' in your relationships?

ROMANS 13:11-14

3. What might Holy Spirit be calling you to "lay down" or "die to" in your flesh at this moment?

4. Read the above scriptures this week. Pray and ask the Lord to speak to you about areas of unforgiveness, and areas of sacrifice.

Journal what you hear Holy Spirit saying and pray for the Lord to show you HIS truth in that area.