

Romans 13:1-10.

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. ² Consequently, he who 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 he will commend you. ⁴ 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. ⁵ Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because 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 everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor. ⁸ Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law. ⁹ The commandments, "Do not commit adultery," "Do not murder," "Do not steal," "Do not covet," and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: "Love your neighbor as yourself." ¹⁰ Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.

The Basics of Christianity, One Word at a Time: Love

It may seem like a strange combination in today's world, however, here is a pairing that deserves our attention. Are you ready?... Government and love. In today's world those two words aren't exactly words that are so quickly paired. However, in chapter 13 of the book of Romans, Paul speaks of these two basic themes in depth. He even goes as far as connecting the two concepts and displaying how they overlap and touch in a Christian's life. These are certainly, then, useful and timely words for us to consider today. As we continue in our study of the basics of Christianity, as we take a close look at our faith, and as we consider how that faith might be displayed and carried out in our daily lives, let us consider, above all, the single word: Love.

The very term for love used here, is that of agape. This Greek word carries the meaning of a self-sacrificing love that puts the needs of others first. In the social and political climate that we currently find ourselves in, these days, it is this all-important attitude of love that is often lacking. Instead of love and forms of love such as honor and respect, a loveless and self-serving attitude has become a societal norm. With sinful natures that trend toward selfishness it is so terribly easy for us to get sucked into a loveless attitude that results in our own hateful thoughts, hurtful words, and unloving actions. This lack of love, and honor, and respect, especially towards those in authority is

one of many reasons that it has become all the more important to consider what God's will is for us a citizen in this world in which we live.

And all this stands on the groundwork that Paul has laid in this letter. We give thanks for all that God has done for us. By his grace and mercy, the Lord has redeemed us, rescued us from eternal punishment. Because of his great and steadfast love, we are saved for eternity and cared for each day. And one of the many things that our caring and loving Lord does for us, to protect us, to provide for us, is that he has established government. Our LORD has seen to it that systems of authority have been established to provide for the well-being of those who live and dwell in this world that he created. God loves us, cares for us, and in his love for us he establishes a way to protect his people, provide for his people, and to care for his people.

And so now, here in Romans chapter 13, God lays out his expectations for both those in authority and those who are under their rule and care. This is perhaps the defining section of Scripture on this topic, and so we give our careful attention to these words as it revealed just how important the role of Christian love plays in all of this.

In describing the responsibility of both the citizen and those in authority Paul writes, ***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.*** This is God's will for the civic responsibility of the Christian: to submit to the governing authorities, to willingly place themselves under the authority that has been established out of love and obedience to God for he is the one who has established the authorities that exist. As Christian citizens of this land in which we live, this is what God has called us to do: submit, to place ourselves under, to obey those in authority. And we ought to do this in a way that shows respect and honor. And before we object, or add any sort of caveats or disclaimers about the current state of affairs and how this might somehow exclude us from such honor and respect, we remember that Paul wrote these words to Christians in Rome. Christian in Rome lived under the rule of a downright cruel Empire with Emperors and local officials who would blame, abuse, and mistreat, and even kill Christians. No disclaimers, no exceptions, God calls us to honor and respect, to show this kind of love to those in authority.

A little bit later in this section, Paul would add these useful instructions,⁷ ***Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.*** The authorities that exist have the high calling of providing for the needs of society. In order to keep peace and order, in order to manage the needs of a town, a city, a state, and nation, those who rule have been given the authority to commend those who do good and to punish those who do evil. This is a high calling. This is an important task. Thus, dear fellow citizens, we ought to give such authorities on the local, state, and federal levels the honor and respect that is due to them as those in authority as this will assist them greatly in carrying out their important duty.

This is something that our conscience would tell is good and right, and by extension would seem to fall under the category of common sense. But human common sense is too easily erased by sinful human emotion, and our conscience can easily be dulled and influenced by the misleading patterns of this world. And so, our Lord Jesus, who once

spoke of *giving to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God who is God*, sets these much-needed expectations before us here through his apostle Paul. Submit to the governing authorities who have been established by God, and if you owe them honor or respect or even taxes give them what belongs to them and to their office out of obedience and love for God.

This is what God expects of his children living as citizens in this world: respect, honor, and obey those in authority just as if we were serving God. These words from Romans 13 remind us of the roles that God has established for the good of society. It is, therefore, also useful to see that these words also indicate what God expects of those in authority as well. He calls them servants, those who serve his will (whether they know it or not), and they are servants of those under their rule. They are put in place to commend those who do good and to punish those who do evil. Such positions of authority should not be taken lightly and should be carried out with a proper sense of responsibility and reverence as they strive to do what is right.

It doesn't always happen that way, however. Sinful human beings plagued by impure motives and prideful attitudes can take a position of responsibility and service, and they twist into something that is used for personal gain. But before we are too quick to blame those in authority, the same self-serving attitude can be found in the selfish complaints and demands of citizens. When you take self-serving love out of the equation on either side, or out the equation completely, you can easily see how things could easily break down and quickly deteriorate. Thus, it becomes all the more important to take to heart God's simple command. Love your neighbor as yourself. We ought not think only of what others owe us, but what we owe to others. Our civic responsibility can often be boiled down to the simple command: Love your neighbor. Think about that other person. Think about your station in life and act in love out of thanks to God. What the world needs now is not more hateful words or self-serving actions, but love. As Christians who know the love of God we can let our light shine in the midst of the darkness that has descended. May the Lord lead us to speak in love instead of hate, to continue to show respect and honor even when so many have sunk down into shameful slander, the ugliness of name calling, and the drudgery of profanities. May the Lord lead us to continue to take the high road as we avoid such selfish and harmful behavior so that our lives as Christian citizens can be a powerful witness to the love of Christ that dwell within us. Christ and his light and the power of his love guides and empowers us in every way.

Yes, today, it is all the more important to see how these terms: government and love fit together. On the heels of encouraging Christian citizens to ⁷ ***Give everyone what you owe him... if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.*** Paul writes this, ⁸ ***Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law.***

There are a few Old Testament examples that come to mind when considering the complexities of living as both a citizen of the land in which we live and a citizen of heaven. Consider the familiar stories of Daniel, as well as Shadrach, Meshack, Abednego (the three men who were thrown into the fiery furnace). They were living under the authority of foreign king in a land who laws didn't always match up with the will of God. The Bible describes them as those who showed love and respect to those in authority and when they

found themselves in stark disagreement with the laws of the land they did not resort to shameful, disrespectful ways, but honored both God and those in earthly authority. In the end God would bless their faith and set them up for generations to come as a wonderful example of fulfilling the law of love to God, to neighbor, and to those in authority.

To be clear, such honor for the government and those in authority does not entail just rolling over and accepting as good and right every single decision and action, law and regulation, that our local, state, or federal government comes up with. We can disagree - especially when they go against the will of God - but let us, even in our disagreements, act and talk in such a way that shows respect and honor to those in authority. And that really goes for the way that we treat everyone else in our life as well. ***⁸Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law.*** Love your neighbor. In Christian love, let us not stoop to the falling standards of our sinful flesh that so quickly jumps at the opportunity to slander and to tear down those around us - especially those who have different views than us. But instead in view of God mercy, out of love for God, out of love for our neighbor let us speak and act with patience and love. If we have a disagreement with our neighbor, or a friend, or a family member, we ought not to air that grievance out before the world on social media or gossip as we attack the one who has wronged us in a selfish effort to win the argument, but in love we ought to speak *to that person* and do so with gentleness and humility. The debt of love that we owe to our neighbor may sometimes include the tough love of rebuking sinful behavior or addressing sinful words and attitudes that go against the will of God, but we do this with love and respect in an effort to win our brother or sister over. We act and speak in love, with respect, as we fulfill that continuing call to love your neighbor as yourself.

We must admit that it is difficult to avoid the trap of hateful words and unloving actions that is being set by the world all around us. The ugly war of words touches a nerve and sucks us in. But the Word of the LORD pulls us out of that pit and assists us as we serve our LORD and neighbor. In Christ, we are washed of our sins, renewed in our faith, and called to higher things by our Savior. For the one who created the whole world, willingly subjected himself to the rule of sinful men. And when justice was twisted against him, when grown men spit on him, when leaders and men of noble position insulted him, he remained silent. He submitted himself to the governing authorities even in his unjust death. He did not stoop to their standards to win an argument or prove a point, but he showed respect and honor perfectly as he life a perfect life of love and obedience in our place. He did this to save us. He did this in love. He did this for you and me. So that we might dwell with him in his kingdom of glory forever. For now, he calls us to love each other and to respect and honor those in authority as we trust in our LORD who rules over all things. In view of God's love let us see this as a pair established by God for our good: love and government. Government and love. Love for neighbor and carrying out our civic responsibility. May the Lord Jesus be with each and every one of us and bless us with his love so that we may carry out our roles as Christians citizens to the benefit our of neighbor and to the glory of God. Amen.