

A Look at Romans 12 and 13

In today's highly partisan environment it is easy for American believers to be carried away with the passionate belief that politics can be the solution to our nation's problems. If only we could elect the right official or enact the right law, all would be well. If only we could prevent this or that inappropriate behavior by using the coercive power of government, we would be blessed. Unfortunately this view ignores the Two Kingdoms concept found in Colossians 1:12-14 and elsewhere. The kingdom of darkness serves Satan's wishes, while the kingdom of light belongs to God's dear Son.

There are several places in the New Testament that tell the citizens of the kingdom of God's dear Son about their responsibilities toward government. Perhaps the key passage is Romans 13:1-7. To grasp this passage well, we need to consider it in its context by looking at all of Romans 12 and 13. As we look at the two chapters, keep in view whom Paul is addressing. In all of chapter 12 and in chapter 13 after verse 7, Paul is speaking to fellow believers in general. He makes it clear that God wants to work with his people to develop the character of Christ in them. They are to offer their bodies to God, cease to conform their thinking to the thinking of the world, and to be transformed by the renewal of their minds. In this process of transformation they are to use the gifts God has given them to serve Him and the church.

In the second half of chapter 12 Paul gives specific lifestyle directions, all of them possible only because of God's grace to His children. A key aspect of these directions is Paul's insistence that we live at peace with all men. This includes persecutors, those who curse us, and those who have done evil toward us (vv. 11-21). All of this chapter has been addressed to believers.

Then, in the first seven verses of chapter 13, Paul shifts his gaze to the relations of Christians with the government. Paul is giving the ideal relationship as God wishes it to be. God has instituted governmental authority to maintain order in a fallen world. He has established these men and these offices to keep chaos at bay and to encourage as much good as possible among those who are not committed to Jesus. These men are indeed God's servants and have a charge from Him to keep. But it is emphatically not the charge God has given to His people, the church. The rulers bear the sword necessarily, as agents of God's wrath. This degree of restraint through coercive use of the sword is necessary at least sometimes to keep the unbelievers from committing injustice against others. All of this is directed at "he" and "they"

unbelievers, in contrast to the direction of the commands in chapter 12 to “you,” or “we,” or “us” believers. When believers are addressed in chapter 13, it is to require that Christians render submission, payment of taxes, respect, and honor to the governing authorities. Believers are never included in the governing authorities, and, indeed, have been told in chapter 12 not to do the very things that the rulers are commissioned to do. The rulers are agents of God’s wrath (13:4) while we Christians are to lay down all vengeance and trust in God’s exercise of justice (12:17-20). Instead we are not to “be overcome by evil, but [to] overcome evil with good” (v. 21).

Immediately after this call to proper conduct before the magistrates, Paul resumes his call to the church in chapter 13 to live lives that will draw others to Jesus. Fulfill the Law by love. Be alert to the nearness of the Lord’s return. Live in light of this fact and thus be lights to the Gentiles. Clothe yourselves in the Lord Jesus Christ. What could draw others more powerfully than this! This clothing of ourselves in Jesus involves all those details belonging to the lives of believers that Paul had enumerated earlier in chapters 12 and 13. Paul called on those who live in the kingdom of light to live extraordinary lives that cause us to conform more and more to Jesus and that shine out the light of reality—the reality of what it means to live a fully human life.

For those who are still in the kingdom of darkness, it is necessary to have laws and coercion for the disobedient (13:4) and to offer praise for those who obey (13:3-4a). Believers should not need this. When we do, we bring dishonor to our Lord! Let us live lives that will wake unbelievers up and draw them to worthwhile lives lived in conformity to our risen Lord! We are to woo others into the kingdom of light. The sword of government cannot do this. If Christians try to use the sword, they will only drive away those who might otherwise consider the call of Christ on their lives. This has happened before; let us not repeat the past mistake of trying to use the government to establish the kingdom of light on earth.