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ROMANS 13:1-7 | LIVING WITH AUTHORITY

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VERSE 1 - BLUE

Paul provides instructions for "every soul," which applies directly to those in the age of grace. It's worth noting that Paul gives similar instructions in Titus 3:1, and Peter does the same in 1 Peter 2:13-14.

The instruction is to "be subject unto the higher powers." The Greek terminology is well translated in the KJV, referring to any higher power. Modern translations often use "governing authority" (NASB, ESV, NIV), which is arguably the context, but to narrow the focus to governing authorities by interpretive decision rather than literal interpretation is irresponsible. It is not the translator's job to dictate the context to the readers, but to give a literal translation so that the readers may make determinations on their own.

The word "power" in verse 1 is used for divine authority (Mt. 28:18), human authority (1 Cor. 11:10), spiritual power (Eph. 6:12), moral authority (1 Cor. 9:4-6), and the authority over sickness and disease (Lk 9:1). The word "higher" means "above your standing."

Paul then gives a key to the entire passage when he says, "the powers that be are ordained of God." It's crucial to note that the power or authority is ordained, not the person in power.

What criteria for obedience should a person give when it comes to authority? One might ask:

- Is the authority God-ordained?
- Did the individual come into the authority in a manner that would be God-ordained?
- Is the activity ordered under the God-given authority?

If all three of those do not receive an affirmative answer, then this verse does not apply because the verse concerns "powers...ordained of God" and not powers taken by man. Of course, these questions can lead to complex theological and ethical discussions, and the answers are typically not clearly delineated in real life.

VERSE 2 - BLUE

The Greek word τάσσω [tasso] appears several times in verses 1-2. It means "to set in order," conveying the idea of "ordained." God has established a hierarchy of authority in creation, starting from the created order with man's dominion and extending to the family with the roles of husband, wife, and children. Furthermore, God has ordered social relationships between men and governments. Acknowledging this "ordination" of God and following it leads to peaceful living.

- In verse 1, the authority is "ordained of God," with the word tasso translated "ordained."
- In verse 2, the one who resists authority is **antitasso**, with the prefix **anti**, "against."
- Also in verse 2, the "ordinance of God" is **diatasso**, with the prefix **dia**, which adds the idea of completeness, or that which is "thoroughly ordered."

The punishment for this is "damnation." In the 17th Century the word had a more general meaning than "eternal destruction," and it is in this more general sense the word is used here. Oxford English Dictionary gives definition 2.a., "The action or fact of condemning, esp. by judicial sentence."¹

¹ Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "damnation, n., int., adv., adj.," July 2023. <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/6126867018>

VERSE 3 - BLUE

Paul now clearly speaks of “rulers,” using the word ἄρχων [archon], from which we get “monarch,” which is used when there is a single “ruler.” It is always used of someone in an official capacity in the New Testament. He says that these rulers “are not a terror to good works.” It seems clear that he refers to legitimate rulers in their legitimate roles. The Pharisees, for example, though as a movement and type of political party they had influence, they were not “rulers” in official capacity. These “moral rulers,” however, could be described as “a terror to good works, see Mark 3:1-4, for example.

In fact, Paul himself challenged authority at times.

1. **Before the Sanhedrin:** In Acts 23, Paul is brought before the Jewish Sanhedrin, and during his defense, he confronts the High Priest Ananias, calling him a "whited wall" (Acts 23:3). Paul's words were a response to what he perceived as an unjust command.
2. **In Philippi:** In Acts 16, after being beaten and imprisoned without trial (a violation of his rights as a Roman citizen), Paul refused to leave the prison quietly when the magistrates sent word for him to be released. Instead, he insisted that the magistrates come themselves to release him (Acts 16:37).
3. **Appealing to Caesar:** In Acts 25, Paul exercises his legal right as a Roman citizen to appeal to Caesar, effectively bypassing the local authorities who were handling his case. This appeal could be seen as a challenge to the local rulers, who might have preferred to deal with the matter themselves.

Paul's actions in these cases demonstrate that submission to authority in the New Testament is not an absolute, unquestioning obedience. Christians are generally called to respect and submit to governing authorities, but this submission is not without limits. Where authorities command something contrary to God's law or where they themselves violate just laws, Christians may have grounds for civil disobedience or legal challenge.

This instruction that “rulers are not a terror to good works” is insight both to rulers and those ruled. It becomes a pseudo-job-description for the ruler, who should welcome good works and bring evil works to a stop. It is also an instruction to those ruled, to “do that which is good.”

The community, nation, or society that has both good rulers and good citizens is blessed indeed. Both should be fostered by education, good laws, a just legal system, and the advancement of moral instruction.

VERSE 4 - BLUE

This verse expresses perhaps the clearest role of a governing authority in the Bible, certainly for the age in which we live. The authority is a “minister” or **servant**, using the word διάκονος [diakonos] whose function it is to punish evildoers. Other passages of Scripture also have clarity on this issue, however, including Genesis 9:6, Proverbs 16:14, and 1 Peter 2:14.

Scripture provides only a limited role to government, yet inevitably, government grows bloated, well beyond being the punisher of evildoers. Christian citizens should consider what it means to “Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's” (Matt. 22:21). Perhaps, more often than not, they are rendering to Caesar that which is God's.

One note should be given on the word διάκονος [diakonos]. Often pastors and others will argue that deacons in the church are only servants and have no administrative or oversight role. The argument is often based on the word **diakonos**. While the word does have servant connotations, it does not restrict the function of the servant, as evidenced by verse 4.

VERSE 5 - GREEN

I have chosen to use green in the color coding system, signifying that these verses are not directed at us specifically, but their application would not cause doctrinal harm. I made the change from blue to green based on the grammar, moving from instructions for "every soul" in verses 1-4 to the more specific "ye," the Roman Jews, in verses 5-7.

Paul mentions the "wrath" that is in the hands of the government, but he also mentions that one should be subject to authority "also for conscience sake." The Greek word translated as "conscience" is συνείδησις [suneidasis], which literally

means "together with insight." There could be no better English word than "conscience," which in etymology means "together with science."

In short, Paul says to be subject to authority not only because there are consequences, but simply because it is the right thing to do. In the dispensation of grace, our behavior is largely left to conscience.

VERSE 6 - GREEN

Upon the same basis of conscience Paul instructs the Roman Jews to pay "tribute."

The use of this particular Greek and English word is insightful for two reasons.

First, the Greek word φόρος [phoros] refers to a specific tax levied only on individuals from a conquered nation. It is not a normal tax of citizens, but rather a tax imposed on foreigners who have been conquered. The King James Version translates the word as "tribute," which is also a term used exclusively for a tax on conquered nations. Most modern translations, such as NASB, ESV, and NIV, use the word "tax" instead of "tribute," likely because "tribute" is considered archaic. However, it should be noted that the word "tax" does not accurately convey what Paul was referring to. Furthermore, since the modern world has no knowledge of "tribute," the word seems outdated, but it is the only term that accurately describes the ancient situation. In an attempt to be contemporary, these translations have made inaccuracies.

Secondly, the use of the phrase "Roman Jews" strengthens the case presented since Chapter 1 that the audience whom Paul wrote to were specifically Roman Jews. In fact, if the audience were local Roman citizens who had converted to Christianity, they would not have been subjected to a φόρος [phoros].

This is one of those verses where a persnickety eye for grammar can be insightful, reminding us to be meticulous when we read the words of the Word.

VERSE 7 - GREEN

Paul summarizes by encouraging the Roman Jews to "Render therefore to all their dues." That is, if they are owed something, they should receive it. He uses the word ὀφειλή [opheila], from which the English woman's name **Ophelia** derives. The word means "profit" or even "blessing," and here is used in the sense of "that which someone has earned."

He then, more poetically, speaks of "tribute" and "custom" along with "fear" and "honor."

When introducing the word "custom," he uses the more common term for taxing both citizens and foreigners, τέλος [telos], which literally means "end" but is used in finance to refer to something similar to a modern sales tax.

Paul goes beyond legal requirements to emphasize the moral goodness of "fear" and "honor," which should be part of every Christian's basic moral behavior. To pay respect to authority and give honor where it is due is the mark of a civilized people.