

Romans: Comment and Commentary

“Therefore, accept one another,
just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God (15:7).”

Parenthesis: This verse seems to summarize the book.

“Accept one another:” the purpose of the book (12-15)

“Just as Christ accepted us:” the foundation of the exhortation (1-11)

- I. Prologue, 1:1-17
- II. The Universality of Human Sinfulness, 1:18-3:20
- III. The Universality of Divine Righteousness for the Jew and Gentile: Justification, 3:21-4:25
- IV. The Assurance of God’s Righteousness: Sanctification
- V. The Vindication of God’s Righteousness: His Promises to Israel, 9:1-11:36
- VI. The Application of God’s Righteousness: The Believer’s Walk, 12:1-15:13

A. The Application for believers, 12:1-21

B. The Application outside the Church, 13:1-14

This chapter has been described as the Christian citizen’s chapter. He/she is to be loyal to government (1-7), justly toward the neighbor (8-10), and godly in personal demeanor (11-14). The reason Paul inserts this paragraph has been debated. The most reasonable answer seems to be that the apostle did not want his readers to draw incorrect conclusions from the exhortation not to be conformed to this age. We are not free from submission in all areas!

- 1. In relation to the state: public obligations, vv. 1-7

Parenthesis: civil government and the church

Over the centuries Christians have embraced a variety of opinions as to the role of the state. Protestants generally have viewed the state and church as two separates though interconnected, sovereign spheres. Luther, for example, viewed government essentially in a negative light as a necessary evil to maintain civil harmony and peace in a fallen world. Calvin viewed the state in a much more positive light and greater interconnectedness with the state the protector and defender of the church and the church the moral and religious compass of the state, a Bible commonwealth. Others, such as the Baptists, separated and sought to disconnect the two spheres seeing the state as the world and evil. The Roman Catholic tradition has argued that the state is subservient to the church because the successors of Peter have been given the keys of authority over both spheres, the church being supreme.

Generally, Luther’s view seems to prevail in the western nations. The state has a God-granted role in a fallen world. It is charged with providing civil security and the

protection of its citizenry. When, however, civil authorities step into the legitimate and exclusive domain of the church (such as its duty to worship the Christ or the right to evangelize), violating our right of granting supreme allegiance to God, the state, regarding such things, is not to be obeyed (Acts 5:29). Thus, the state has a positive, though limited role over our lives. It is to be obeyed and honored, even feared, as it relates to the performance of its God-given role in society (II Thess. 2:6-7, Titus 3:1, I Pet. 2:13-17); taxes are to be paid for its maintenance. Civil order is preferable to social chaos!

The problem that arises with government is that it is an institution that exists in a fallen world and, at times, bears witness to the fallen nature of mankind (the greed, the want of place, power). Government emerged in the line of Cain to provide protection from the dark side of human nature, mankind being no longer capable of self-government unless through fear of the ramification of wantonness (Gen 4:16-22). The Tower of Babel incident became the first attempt of governance apart from God (Gen 11). The Judges of Israel, as well as the subsequent dynasties of kings, were instituted to rule as God's representative under divine law, but all failed because of the blight of human nature. At best, government is only a shadow of what the true government shall be someday when Christ shall reign over His people and sin is forever extinguished in His righteous, eternal reign. Sadly, in Revelation, government is described as "the Great Whore (17)." It is government at its worst! Jesus' comments on government are found in Matt 22:15-22, Mark 12:17. In the experience of Paul, the state proved both his benefactor and nemesis.

a. The command, v. 1a

The word "subject" means to submit; it is a military term used to describe the chain of command. "Soul" literally means every single person; no one is exempt.

The phrase "governing authorities" is used of angelic rule in some contexts, though in such cases it is often demonic; here, Paul speaks of such governing authorities in a positive light. The Bible seems to imply that behind government are powers that govern (Deut. 32:8, Dan. 10).

b. The causes, v. 1b

The "for" indicates the reason for the command; authority over civil matters has been given by God to the state. Government is the product of the divine will. Because of mankind's sinfulness, government is a gift to curb lawlessness and promote good.

c. The implications, vv. 2-6

"Therefore" suggests deductions to be derived from the truth that God has empowered civil government.

1) Civil disobedience incurs justifiable judgment, v. 2

2) Civil authorities are bad only for the lawbreakers, vv. 3-4

These verses are an explanation or expansion of the thought in the previous verse. In the function of civil authority to curb wickedness, the state is the servant of God.

- 3) Obedience is required to avoid punishment and a disturbed conscience, v. 5
Here the apostle states the reasons for civil compliance: one is external in nature and the other is internal (to avoid a troubled conscience).
- 4) Taxation is the cost of good government, v. 6
- d. The conclusion, v. 7
Because governmental officials are "God's ministers" (vv. 4, 6), they are to be respected. "Custom" refers to a form of taxation or levy on goods, "tribute" to personal and property tax. Reverence is due to governmental authorities ("fear") on account of their station). Believers fear God because of His person and fear men because of their station!

Parenthesis: Is there a limit to governmental subservience? All authority is delegated by God and has limitations. If Christians are required to give unlimited submission to government, and are asked to violate the revelation of God, are they to disobey God? Is a wife required to break the law of God and man in obedience to her husband should he ask her to rob a bank or kill an opponent? God's people are to be obedient to the state to the point that it does not violate their conscious obedience to God (Acts 5:29). Legitimate disobedience implies a willingness to endure the consequences openly. Civil protest is not the same as civil disobedience. Stifler notes, "One can refuse to do wrong and undergo the penalty without resisting the power."

Parenthesis: Does the state have the right to exact capital punishment? Does the duty of restraint and punishment include the death penalty? Paul uses the word "sword" (maschaira) in 8:35 to indicate death. He has the same meaning here. See also Acts 12:2 and Revelation 13:10.

2. In relation to society: private obligations, vv. 8-10
In the church, the Spirit rules; in the state, moral law rules. Moral law is the application of common grace or reason. Believers' greatest obligation (Lev. 19:18; Matt. 22:34-40), and the summation of all others, is to love one another. What ties this passage with the previous is the notion of obligation (to the state, vv. 1-7 and love to others vv. 8-10 and 11-14).
 - a. The negative side, v. 8
Christians are to have no unpaid debts. The Bible makes it plain that a Christian can borrow money from others in case of need (Matthew 5:42; Luke 6:35). What is condemned here is looseness in contracting obligations and an indifference in discharging obligations.

The present tense of the imperative with the negative indicates that Paul is saying that these believers should stop an action already in progress.
 - b. The positive side, vv. 9-10
Love is the voluntary motive that fulfills the law (does what is right). The state, however, must resort to the sword (threat) because it is merely a human

invention and cannot create loving relationships. Though it can make good laws, it cannot inspire the love that heeds them. Love expressed is epitomized in the Ten Commandments. Paul cites four of them. All four, as are eight of the ten, are negative.

“Love of yourself” is not the same as selfishness. Selfishness is being absorbed in oneself with no regard for others.

3. In relation to eschatological hope, vv. 11-14

The section ends the opposite of the way it began. In 12:1-2, Paul urged Christians to look at the present considering the past. Because of Christ, the old age has been surpassed by a new one. Here he asks his readers to look at the present considering the future.

a. The coming of the Lord, v. 11

The incentive for obedience to the state is the realization that this is a temporal home only and that believers shall soon be in a better state. The exhortation is for the drowsy believer. Sleep is the “sleep” of selfishness.

“Already this hour” likely refers to the time of the culmination of God’s redemptive plan; it is the time when our final salvation is near (the time of receiving our new bodies in the final resurrection or translation).

b. The expectant conduct, v. 12-13

Consequently, believers are to do three things: cast out the works of darkness, maintain a lifestyle consistent with being a believer, and walk circumspectly.

The list of sins in v. 13 consists of three pairs of two terms each though there seems to be a degree of overlapping. “Carousing and drunkenness” refers to sexual immorality often linked to pagan religious ritual. “Sexual promiscuity and sensuality” focus upon sexual perversion, while the initial couplet seem to connect drunkenness with sexual innuendo. “Strife and jealousy” suggest interpersonal conflict.

From a New Testament perspective, the “nearness of the Lord” is prophetic in perspective, not one of chronological calculation. “Night” is this age, the time between the two advents of the Savior.

c. The conclusion, v. 14

These words are addressed to believers as the entire book; Christ must be in them before He can be put on by them; it is a metaphor for action. The words “put on” suggest a definite decision. It is a clothing metaphor. Considering 6:1-10, it means to be identified with Christ, not only in His death to sin but in His resurrection to new life.

“Make no provision” is a present imperative, suggesting an ongoing action, something in process. This indicates that some Romans Christians were living inappropriate moral lives.

Applications:

1. We should be willing to be taxed, even though government does not necessarily affirm our morals or support our values. Is there any government in this world that you would say is more supportive than the nation in which you reside? Is it legitimate to protest taxation arguing that it is unconstitutional, as some do? Is it wrong for a Christian to support a government that enacts policies antithetical to Christian values and causes?
2. Obedience to the laws of the land is not subject to our own views of their propriety, nor done selectively. While it is within the prerogative for the citizenry to disagree with the laws of legitimate government, it is not within the choice of the citizens to determine which ones to obey and not obey. Do you think that this applies to laws that appear foolish and needlessly inconvenient? Are we to fear government when we do wrong? Is it not part of our submission to God?
3. Government is “the servant of God” for good that entails the right and duty to suppress evil. When the citizenry wields the sword, it is called anarchy. If Christians disobey a law of their land, they must realize that the prerogatives of the state to force conformity to established law is to be expected and endured, even though a government may not operate under nor perpetuate Christian values.
4. The cost of government for us is to support it in prayer, finances, obedience, and participation (from office holding to military participation). When Christians openly and callously criticize the personhood of leadership, not the performance of duties and values, is that ever appropriate?
5. Civil government is a divine institution. If your country is operated by less than Christian values, would you be willing to say that it has been appointed by God? If you affirm divine appointment, how can we at the same time pursue silence when legitimate criticism is the right of the citizenry and the right thing to do? What should the form of criticism take? What are inappropriate responses?
6. If our constitutional government suddenly was violated and abolished and another form of government was instituted, what would you do? Since no existing governmental form is strictly biblical and none are decidedly Christian, how would you react if suddenly you awoke to realize that a government change has occurred? How would you decide whether the new government should be obeyed? How do you decide what is your legitimate government when a change takes place? Should you defend the one out of power or the new one in power? How do you decide?
7. That the Lord should be expected at any time should tell us that this is not the “world” we should live for; there is a better place to come. The words of an old song capture the thought. “This world is not my home, I’m just a passing through! My treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the blue.” If the Lord is coming to bring us a better world, what does it tell us about this one and how we are to react to it and live in it? Do you tend to think that this is the best of all possible realities?
8. All Christian duty is summarized in putting on the character of the Lord Jesus, the metaphor of clothing functioning in the sphere of what should characterize us. In this light the motivation within our passage is that while we live in a world of temporalities, we should live in the light of what is eternal. The nearness of the Lord’s coming should help us to understand

that living and shaping our lives by what is passing is futile. Are you allowing the perspective of heaven to inform your choices and determine the direction of your conduct? Is your view of heaven ordered by your delights of the earth?