

Romans: Verse-by-Verse

Romans 13:1-3

Throughout Romans 12, Paul instructed Christians on how to respond to the injustices of living in a fallen world. He encouraged believers to adopt three important principles: 1. Do Not Repay Anyone For Evil. 2. Do Not Take Revenge. 3. Do Not Be Overcome By Evil.

Romans 13: Paul expands what he has said about believers living in a fallen world as he explains how Christians are to deal with secular authorities. Several questions need to be addressed:

- **How does the universal Church relate to the State?**

The historical setting in which Paul wrote these instructions:

1. There were no Christian authorities. This was true globally, regionally, and locally. Christians living in Palestine found themselves under two sets of authorities: The Romans and the Jewish Sanhedrin.

2. The Roman persecution of Jews and Christians was greatly increasing. The Emperor Claudius had ordered all the Jews to leave Rome and was persecuting Christians as well.

“How have Christians historically viewed the Church’s relationship to the State – meaning the secular authority of this world? John Stott suggests there have been four primary models for Church and State throughout the Christian centuries.

1. Erastianism: The State controls the Church.

Thomas Erastus, a 16th-century theologian, was involved in a debate over the rights of Calvinist religious leaders to excommunicate certain individuals. Erastus proposed that only secular authorities had the right

to punish individuals because the State held the final jurisdiction.

2. Theocracy: The Church controls the state.

“Theocracy”. In this model, The Church controls the state. Several examples could be cited, such as Calvin’s arrangement in 16th century Geneva, Switzerland or the Anabaptists of Munster, Germany.

3. Constantinianism: The State favors the Church, and the Church accommodates the state.

The 4th-century Eastern Roman Emperor Constantine issued the Edict of Milan in 313 A.D, which allowed both Jews and Christians to worship as they chose.

Constantine saw the relationship of the Church and State to be somewhat entwined. Neither entity had full power, but the State held the ultimate authority.

4. Partnership: The Church and state recognize and encourage each other’s distinct God-given responsibilities.

With the Protestant Reformation, the relationship of the Church and State saw many challenges. Those who rejected Papal authority were forced to find a model that allowed both Church and State to have their respective spheres of authority.

Under Partnership, the Church and state recognize and encourage each other’s distinct God-given responsibilities.

- **“How did Paul envision the Church/State relationship in his first-century setting?”**

Paul largely took his view from Jesus’ cues. When Jesus was asked about paying taxes to Caesar, he responded, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.” – Matthew 22:21

Paul believed that the Church and State had different roles, and Christians were responsible to both. In Romans 13 he stresses God's intentions for these roles, without proposing any theory of Church/State relationship.

Paul will propose that secular authorities are established by God, and Christians are required to submit to them and cooperate with them. He draws upon the long-standing Old Testament understanding that God is sovereign over human affairs, regardless of what human powers may operate.

- **The State's Authority and Authorization**

Paul begins this section with a statement that applies to all Christians: *"Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established."*

Isn't immediately question: Has God really established every secular authority? Is this a blanket statement?

Does Paul mean that God had personally picked and authorized the likes of Caligula, Herod, Nero, and Domitian? What about the dictators of our world, such as Adolph Hitler, Joseph Stalin, Mao Tse Tung, Idi Amin, and Saddam Hussein?

Paul is referencing the ancient Judaic view that all human authority is derived from -- and is subject to -- God's own authority. In principle, there can be no human authority that stands on its own.

The Scriptures do not attempt to explain how God can be Almighty, and yet allow human rulers to exert their authority. What we are told is that God works through history, no matter who is in human authority.

See: **Psalm 115:3; Daniel 2:21; Daniel 4:17; Colossians 1:16; John 19:11**

This is the point we need to understand. As Christians, we are to submit to human authorities – if for no other reason – their authority stems from

God's own. In Romans 13:1-3, Paul will tell us this three times:

1. There is no authority except that which God has established (1b).
2. The authorities that exist have been established by God (1c).
3. Whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted (2a).

- **What Are The Consequences Of Rebelling Against The State?**

Notice what Paul says in verses 2-3: 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.

The 1st-century context: Paul is writing at a time when there are no Christians in secular authority over local, regional, or national areas. All Christians are under the authority of secular, pagan rulers.

Yet, Paul warns against them about rebellion. He tells them that to rebel is to set themselves against what God has instituted – and that it will result in bringing judgment on themselves.

“... 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.”

Paul is not attempting to cover all the possible contingencies. He certainly knows the current Roman Emperor is not only immoral, he is a sadist. Paul knows the emperor is bent on restoring Rome to polytheism.

Still, he tells 1st-century Christians that they must not become anarchists; they are not called to upend Rome. He leaves room for the possibilities of justice, even in the Roman legal system.

Are there times when Christians must resist human authority? We will look at that next time.