

Authority: Belonging to God

Devotional Reading: Proverbs 31:4–9

Background Scripture: Mark 12:17; Romans 13:1, 6–8;

1 Peter 2:13–17

Today's Scripture: Mark 12:17; Romans 13:1, 6–8; 1 Peter 2:13–17

I. Teaching on Authority

Mark 12:17

17 Then Jesus said to them, “Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.”

And they were amazed at him.

17. The conflict here is prompted by the question of whether it is “right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar” (Mark 12:14). Jesus’ questioners are the Pharisees and Herodians (12:13). Although these groups do not typically work together, in this case, they both desire to discredit Jesus no matter how he responds. If Jesus answers *yes*, the Pharisees can say Jesus violates the Law of Moses. If he answers *no*, the Herodians—whose power comes from Rome—can charge him with treason.

Jesus answers by requesting a coin (Mark 12:15–16). After his opponents verify Caesar’s image on it, Jesus directs them to *give back to Caesar* what is due him. Using the coin admits to Caesar’s earthly authority and the benefits they receive from his civil government. One may consider here the advantages that empires provide like military order, safe roads, and superior buildings. With the enjoyment of these assets comes a certain obligation. Then Jesus continues, the people are also to *give to God* the things owed him. Believers owe God honor, respect, obedience, and worship.

Despite his opponents’ attempt to trick him, Jesus answers with all wisdom and grace. His answer gives Roman listeners no room to claim that Christ-followers are disloyal to the state. God’s people are responsible for their earthly citizenship as well as their heavenly citizenship.

II. Tribute to Authority

Romans 13:1, 6–8

¹ Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.

⁶ This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God’s servants, who give their full time to governing. ⁷ Give to everyone what you owe them: 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 whoever loves others has fulfilled the law.

1. Paul addresses how believers should relate to earthly authorities. To be *subject to* means to be ranked under another. We are to submit because *God* establishes all earthly *authorities*. Just prior to

this directive, Paul stresses the importance of believers living peaceably among themselves and under government. The thoughts in this verse are a logical extension of those requirements.

Yet Paul is not demanding total obedience to the whims of every evil or tyrannical ruler. The primary decision is whether the directives of an earthly ruler conflict with the directives of God. Paul was beaten and imprisoned multiple times for allegedly unlawful conduct. When the commands of human authorities conflicted with his duties as God's servant, Paul obeyed God. An even clearer example of this concept is the response of Peter and the other apostles to the Sanhedrin in Acts 5:29: "We must obey God rather than human beings!"

6. Paul's reasoning is indicated through his use of the phrase *this is also why*. To find the antecedent of *why*, we look to the verses just before the one at hand. Paul states that governing powers serve the populace by upholding "right" behavior and punishing "wrong" (Romans 13:3–4). Then he appeals to the reader's conscience (13:5). Since the governing authorities *are God's servants*, then shouldn't one's conscience require that they be supported? The fact that they do their jobs on a full-time basis further buttresses Paul's line of thought.

In any era, taxes feel like (and are) a burden. The extortion committed by corrupt tax collectors in the first century did not help. Despite the injustice of imperial taxation, Paul invites his audience to view paying their taxes not just as a legal obligation but as a moral one as well. A primary element of God's bestowal of authority on local and national leaders is to maintain peace, safety, and order.

The Greek word translated *servants* is different from the word translated "servant" twice in Romans 13:4. In the earlier two instances, the word is the source

of our word *deacon*. But the word here rendered as "servants" only sometimes refers to those devoted to religious service. The old Greek version of the Old Testament, known as the Septuagint, uses it this way often, but the term applies to service in broad senses as well. In the New Testament, the term also describes someone who performs duties toward others for the sake of the Lord. It leans toward those committed to civic good, as in "public servants."

7. The big picture here concerns how to act on one's debts. Paul approaches the topic in terms of four categories. The first is *taxes*, which refers to direct taxes. The second category is *revenue*, which refers to custom duties and fees on gross income. Secular authorities require taxes to function.

Leadership positions deserve the deference inherent in the words *respect* and *honor*, the last two categories. In the Old Testament, *respect* is sometimes used for reverence toward human beings. But throughout the Bible, the word also describes the holy awe one experiences in the presence of God or his miraculous work. *Honor* refers more generally to the respect given to others—whether political leaders, parents, spouses, widows, or God.

8. This verse is connected to the previous seven by the concept of obligation. Paul expands believers' responsibility beyond the political and secular realms. The only debt not to be paid off that aligns with God's kingdom is the commitment *to love one another*. The requirement to love one another renews continually, with every encounter.

Paul uses both *one another* and *others* here. Some commentators argue that the debt of *love* is owed only to fellow believers, as consistent with Paul's use of the phrase "one another" in other writings. But the second half of this verse indicates we are to love people in general. This

matches Jesus' parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37). Believers are called to a wide target of love.

III. Submission to Authority

1 Peter 2:13–17

13 Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority,¹⁴ or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right.¹⁵ For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people.¹⁶ Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as God's slaves.¹⁷ Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honor the emperor.

13a. Writing from Rome, Peter calls believers to respectful citizenship. His directive is truly remarkable, given the persecution by Emperor Nero at the time. Even so, Peter emphasizes the authority of governmental directives by stating that the people should obey *every human authority*. But such submission is not absolute. Peter makes this clear when he explains his act of civil disobedience in Acts 5:29.

As believers follow the laws of the earthly kingdoms in which they reside, their submission will be *for the Lord's sake*. How this happens is explained as Peter continues.

13b–14. Following the general instruction of the previous half-verse, Peter names two offices of earthly authority. First, the *emperor, as the supreme* refers to whoever rules as the overarching *authority*. As Peter writes, that person is Emperor Nero in Rome. Second, *governors* are regional managers. During Peter's time, governors oversaw all the

minor Roman provinces. Judean governors mentioned in the New Testament are Pilate, Felix, and Festus.

A primary task of government is protecting the innocent from *those who do wrong*. A congenial by-product of living a law-abiding life is the resulting praise of *those who do right*. Such commendation is not a primary goal to be sought, however; rather, it is a desirable by-product that reflects well on God. Peter calls believers to consider how their behavior serves as a witness of God to an unbelieving world. God's reputation is at stake!

15. Peter appeals to God's *will* to stress that believers are to be models of proper living. Naysayers of the Christian faith accused Jesus and his followers of sedition and hostility. By living in ways that benefit their fellow citizens, Christ-followers *silence* false accusations. Their careful submission to civil authority aids the church's mission and protects the faithful. Peter assumes an overlap between the moral framework of believers and their presence within society.

16. This verse calls to mind what might be called a "spectrum of behavior." At one extreme end of the spectrum stands "Legalism," which stresses rule-keeping as the model behavior that best reflects on God. At the other extreme end of the spectrum stands "License." This position as the model of behavior is refuted by Galatians 5:13; 2 Peter 2:19; etc. The proper view stands midway between the two extremes. It is called "Liberty." *Freedom* is affirmed by John 8:34; Romans 6:14; 14:1–6; 2 Corinthians 3:17; Galatians 2:4; 5:1–13; etc.

17. Peter concludes with a series of short exhortations. The four statements summarize the previous verses. Give honor to everyone, extend extravagant love to fellow believers, direct awe and reverence to God, and esteem governmental leaders.

