

## Romans 13:1-7—On the Abuse of Biblical Texts and Correlative Abuse

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See Also: [\*From Crisis to Christ\*](#) (Abingdon Press, 2014).

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June 2018

Anything or anyone that has authority, appeal, or sway will be co-opted and used rhetorically by others. Write that down. Learn it. It will never not be so.<sup>1</sup> That includes such authorities the governments, athletes, celebrities, puppies... *and* the Bible. And, one of the most appealed-to-yet-misused texts is Romans 13:1-7.

The incident with Jeff Sessions last week punctuates this problem in unfortunate ways. The separation of children from parents at the border is needlessly traumatic, and more humane alternatives to managing immigration policies must be found by all three branches of government: the Administration, the Judiciary, and the Congress. Zero-tolerance warnings of children separated from their parents as a disincentive to illegal immigration is inhumanely cruel, but decrying the plight of children during one administration but not the previous three is a bit disingenuous. What is needed is a congressional bill that is compassionate, fair, and manageable—one that will endure from one administration to another. Regarding the use

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<sup>1</sup> Ironically, “God, Mom, and apple pie” are used to get young adults to learn lethal violence, but getting rid of any or all of these values will not produce an end to violence. See Paul N. Anderson, “Religion and Violence: From Pawn to Scapegoat,” in *The Destructive Power of Religion: Violence in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, volume 2: *Religion, Psychology, and Violence*, edited by J. Harold Ellens (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2003) 265-83 (<http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ccs/82/>).

of Romans 13:1-7, however, the article in the *Washington Post* by Margaret Aymer and Laura Nasralla is worth noting.<sup>2</sup>

In that editorial, the authors make several good points. First, the Bible cannot be used to argue against immigration; God loves the alien, (Lev 19:33-34), and the love of neighbor is central to the teachings of Jesus (Matt 22:39). Second, during the American Revolution Romans 13:1-7 was interpreted to refer to just rulers, not unjust ones, so a conscience-based case can be made for disobeying unjust governments or unethical statutes. Third, the painful reminder that this passage was used before the Civil War to require the returning of escaped slaves to their owners and to justify Apartheid in South Africa should give one pause before using it to legitimate “unfortunate” effects of legal codes. Fourth, the verses must be viewed within their larger context, and vv. 9-10 call believers to love neighbors as themselves, thus fulfilling the admonitions of Jewish scripture and the teachings of Jesus.

While a case can be made for law and order, it is the right interpretation of Romans 13:1-7 that deserves to be assessed further, as the most common appeals to this influential text are often exegetically flawed. It also illustrates a number of ways people use and misuse the Bible, followed by their or others blaming it for insensitivity or injustice, whether or not interpretations themselves have been properly evaluated. In the light of dozens of rebukes against and defenses of Sessions and his reference to Romans, it’s high time that the record be set straight on what Paul is saying in that biblical text, and more importantly, what he is not. Such is the goal of the present essay.

## **I. What Sessions Said, and How It Went Down**

Given the outrage and anger that has been expressed over the last several days, it’s important to take note of what Sessions said and how it has been received. A one-phrase snippet might not do justice to his overall concern. Of course, the Bible calls for caring for children, widows, orphans, homeless, and aliens, so using the Bible to justify harmful effects of even

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<sup>2</sup> Margaret Aymer and Laura Nasrallah, “What Jeff Sessions Got Wrong When Quoting the Bible,” *Washington Post*, June 15, 2018 ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2018/06/15/what-jeff-sessions-got-wrong-when-quoting-the-bible/?utm\\_term=.9a8992bdad55](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2018/06/15/what-jeff-sessions-got-wrong-when-quoting-the-bible/?utm_term=.9a8992bdad55)). See also other treatments of the issue, including Bruce Chilton, “The Attorney General’s Saint Paul,” *The Bible and Interpretation*, June 2018 (<http://www.bibleinterp.com/opeds/2018/06/chi428017.shtml>).

legal ordinances will be problematic for sure. And yet, each alternative approach to an extremely complex panoply of issues has its own new sets of problems. Nonetheless, here's what Sessions actually said—a rather brief defense of law and order as protecting the weak and the lawful, bolstered by the divine ordaining of governments according to Romans 13.

I'd like to take a little bit of a digression here, to discuss some concerns, here, raised by our church friends about separation of families. Many of the criticisms raised in recent days are not fair, not logical, and some are contrary to plain law. First, illegal entry into the United States is a crime; it should be, it must be, if you're going to have a legal system and have any limits whatsoever. Persons who violate the law of our nation are subject to prosecution. If you violate the law, you subject yourself to prosecution. And I would cite you to the apostle Paul and his clear and wise command in Romans 13, to obey the laws of the government because God has ordained the government for his purposes. Orderly and lawful processes are good in themselves. Consistent, fair application of law is in itself a good and moral thing, and it protects the weak; it protects the lawful.

The problem, though, is with an unwieldy immigration situation, which requires a comprehensive legislative solution, including both a reasonable DACA plan and a long-term manageable immigration approach. Therefore, while Sessions's defense of a zero-tolerance stance may have been well intentioned, its strengths are limited, and the argument itself bears inherent weaknesses.

Limited strengths of Sessions's points:

- In his statement, Sessions is addressing questions raised by church friends, and in so doing makes reference to a biblical text, although interpretations of this text have been historically problematic.
- Sessions points out that the breaking of laws has consequences, and that “orderly and lawful processes are good in themselves,” yet southern border immigration issues are terribly complex, with legal rulings going back and forth on particular issues.
- And, while it is true that “consistent, fair application of law is in itself a good and moral thing, and it protects the weak; it protects the lawful,” recent images and reports have shown the lawful and the weak to be suffering as a result of the recent zero-tolerance approach.

Inherent weaknesses of Sessions's points:

- While “illegal entry into the United States is a crime,” people claiming asylum are not breaking the law in applying for such consideration; they should not be treated as criminals, separated from their children.
- While Paul admonishes believers to obey the government and its codes in good conscience, a zero-tolerance approach to migration-related enforcement laws removes conscientious discretion from the table for on-site officials, forcing hard choices and potentially inhumane outcomes.
- Most ironic is the fact that the suffering of children and families on the border has increased because of a zero-tolerance approach, thus afflicting the weak and vulnerable rather than protecting them.

In the resultant discussions over the last week or so, the images and realities of children separated from their parents and hardships to families have rightly won the day in the court of public opinion. Even if ordinances might be designed to produce positive consequences long term, acute hardships have brought about changes of heart, bolstered by appeals of first ladies and first families, former and present. Put otherwise, the very social concerns that have been furthered by biblical consciousness in western civilization over the centuries have trumped the biblical appeal to law and order, when the ordinances and their implementations themselves are seen as flawed. Thus, while Sessions's appeal to biblical authorization has failed, the larger question is why. Is it that the Bible has been interpreted adequately and rejected by modern society? Or, might it be that a flawed interpretation of a Biblical text has been wielded to support a problematic ordinance, calling for a closer look this notorious passage from Romans? Indeed, the latter is the case, and here's why.

## **II. Problematic Interpretations of Romans 13:1-7**

Sometimes biblical texts are genuinely problematic, defying useful and morally fitting applications. At other times, biblical texts are completely misunderstood and misappropriated, even by well-meaning interpreters, and

Romans 13:1-7 is a classic example of such exegetical foibles.<sup>3</sup> As Oscar Cullmann notes regarding Romans 13:2,

Few sayings in the New Testament have suffered as much misuse as this one. As soon as Christians, out of loyalty to the gospel of Jesus, offer resistance to a State's totalitarian claim, the representatives of that State, or their collaborationists theological advisers, are accustomed to appeal to this saying of Paul, as if Christians are here commanded to endorse and thus to abet all the crimes of a totalitarian State. . . . There can be no question there of an unconditional and uncritical subjection to any and every demand of the State.

Thus, a number of flawed interpretations result largely from failing to see this paragraph within its larger context, leading to notable abuses of this text.<sup>4</sup>

### 1) Supporting the Divine Right of Kings.

Yes, Paul says, "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God" in Romans 13:1; but was that his main point, or was it a basis for his main point? In my view, the latter is clearly the case. In this paragraph, Paul references the divine origin of civil structures of government, advocated by the Roman Empire and supported by the some references in Jewish scripture. Caesar Augustus bolstered his own divine-order legitimacy by referring to his predecessor, Julius Caesar, with divine honors. Thus, imperial Rome, from Virgil's *Aeneid* forward, held up a sense

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<sup>3</sup> Oscar Cullmann, *The State in the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1957) 55-56. Thoughtful commentaries on the passage include: Emil Brunner, *The Letter to Romans: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1959) 107-11; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans*, Anchor Bible Commentary 33 (New York: Doubleday, 1992) If writing from Corinth, he would have known about the Romans situation (Fitzmeyer 662); John R. Stott, *Romans* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994) 338-47; Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007) 780-803; Ernst Käsemann, *A Commentary on Romans*, translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 350-59.

<sup>4</sup> Consider these classic treatments of the issues: J. D. G. Dunn, "Romans 13:1-7—A Charter for Political Quietism?" *Ex auditu* 2 (1986): 55-68; D. C. Steinmetz, "Calvin and Melanchthon on Romans 13:1-7," *Ex auditu* 2 (1986): 74-81; Marcus Borg, "A New Context for Romans iii," *New Testament Studies* 19 (1972-73): 205-18; John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) 192-214; Ernst Käsemann, "Principles of the Interpretation of Romans 13," *New Testament Questions for Today*, translated by W. J. Montague (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1979) 196-216; C. E. B. Cranfield, "Some Observations on Romans xiii. 1-7," *New Testament Studies* 6 (1959-60): 241-49; Bammel, E. "Romans 13," in *Jesus and the Politics of His Day*, ed. E. Bammel and C. F. D. Moule (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984) 365-83; N. T. Wright, "Gospel and Empire," in his *Paul* (London: SPCK 2005) 59-79.

of divine authorization as a legitimation of its bringing the *Pax Romana* to the Mediterranean world. Likewise, David has Saul's sword-bearer killed, despite his mercy-killing of his master, because the king was the Lord's anointed (2 Samuel 1:1-16). Further, obeying the government was also supported by Stoic philosophers, so Paul is appealing to standard societal codes of civic virtue.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, Paul is not innovating here; he is making use of conventional understandings of governance, both Roman and Jewish. Does this mean, though, that Paul would have endorsed Gaius Caligula's setting up a statue of himself in Jerusalem's Temple in 40 CE, calling it the "Temple of Jupiter, the illustrious Gaius,"<sup>6</sup> or that he would have supported assimilative "Christians" willing to deny Christ, declare "Caesar is Lord," or offer incense or an animal offering to the Emperor during the reigns of Domitian or Trajan (81-96, 98-117 CE)?<sup>7</sup> Certainly not! In Pliny's letter to Trajan around 110 CE, even the Bithynia Governor declares that people who do such things *cannot* be Christians, and that they are innocent of the "crime."

Given the contextual backdrop of what had been happening in Palestine, Asia Minor, and Rome over the previous two decades, Paul's interest is clear. He wants followers of Jesus of Nazareth to *not* be confused with Jewish Zealots (what Josephus calls "the Fourth Philosophy"—distinct from Sadducees, Pharisees, and Essenes, *Antiquities* 18.1.1), who sought to rid Israel of the Roman menace by terrorism, violence, and insurrection. Not only did the Zealots (and the *Sicarii*—the dagger-men) kill Roman officials and representatives, but they also attacked, killed, and robbed Jewish leaders of society who collaborated with Rome, funding their Maccabean-type ventures accordingly. Josephus mentions four such messianic leaders in the half-century or so before Paul's writing: Judas the Galilean, the Samaritan, Theudas, and the Egyptian.<sup>8</sup> Given that Jesus was crucified on a Roman cross as a criminal several decades earlier, Paul wants it to be clear that followers of Jesus of Nazareth are law-abiding citizens in good standing, *not*

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<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, Hierocles, *How to Behave Toward One's Fatherland*.

<sup>6</sup> See Philo of Alexandria's account, *Embassy to Gaius* XLIII.346.

<sup>7</sup> See Pliny's letter to Trajan (*Letters* 10.96), where he questions whether he should put to death two young Christian women who would neither deny Christ nor worship Caesar. He was aware of others willing to do both of those things, despite meeting with Jesus adherents for worship, declaring that such cannot be considered Christians.

<sup>8</sup> See the contradistinctions between Jesus and other first-century Jewish prophets referenced by Josephus in Paul N. Anderson, "Jesus and Peace," in *The Church's Peace Witness*, edited by Marlin Miller and Barbara Nelson Gingerich, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994) 104-130 (<http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ccs/96/>).

followers of Judas the Galilean or other Jewish insurrectionists. Note that Paul himself is asked by Roman soldiers, upon his subsequent return to Jerusalem, whether he is “the Egyptian,” who had stirred up a revolt in Jerusalem along with “4,000 assassins” (Acts 21:37). Paul said no, and understandably sought to distance himself and the Jesus movement from violent Jewish rebellions—either in Jerusalem or in Rome—*that* is his point, here.

A second contextual issue also comes into play, here. As the Jesus movement spread—largely the result of the travelling ministries of Paul, Peter, and others—some Jewish and Gentile audiences responded favorably to the gospel, but others did not. As described in Acts, Paul first preached Jesus as the Jewish Messiah in local Synagogues in Cyprus and Antioch, and later in Asia Minor and Greece. The welcoming of Gentile believers into the Jesus movement, however, became an additional scandal among conservative Jewish groups. “How could uncircumcised Gentiles be welcomed into the blessed communities of Abraham and Moses?” conscientious Jewish leaders must have asked. This led to the Jerusalem Council around 48 CE, where James and other leaders concluded that one need not be circumcised (thus showing outward signs of conversion to Judaism) in order to be a follower of Jesus, the Jewish Messiah. Rather, one simply need abstain from eating meat offered to idols, drinking the blood of sacrificed animals, and sexual immorality (Acts 15).

This agreement worked well overall within the Jesus movement, which still saw itself as extending the blessings of Judaism to the nations, but not all Jewish communities in the Mediterranean world agreed. Not only did they question the agency of Jesus, but they also saw the gospel message of grace through *faith* (and not outward signs of faith-and-practice compliance—*works*) as a departure from the historic sign of the Abrahamic covenant (Genesis 17) and a number of other issues and implications. The squabbling between Jesus adherents and Jewish leaders in Rome got so bad that Caesar Claudius banned all Jewish worship in Rome in 49 CE, shutting down the synagogues due to divisions over “*Chrestus*” (likely a reference to Jesus as *Christos*—the Greek word for “the Anointed One”—in Hebrew, *Mashiach*). As a result, many followers of Jesus left Rome and settled among other leading cities in the Empire. Priscilla and Aquila are two such leaders, referenced by Luke and by Paul (Acts 18; Romans 16:3; 1 Cor 16:19; 2 Tim 4:19). According to Acts 18, they were expelled from Jerusalem by the

emperor, along with other Jews; they then met up with Paul in Corinth and elsewhere, even instructing Apollos in his understanding of the gospel.

Following the death of Claudius and the ascension of Nero in 54 CE, many Jesus-adherents returned to Rome. Paul had apparently met or heard about many of these people, as he greets some two-dozen believers in Romans 16, despite not yet having visited the city. Thus, not only does Paul want Jesus followers to distinguish themselves from Jewish insurrectionists; he also wants them to show Roman officials that they can get along with Jewish leaders and communities in Rome instead of being a headache. Similar exhortations to submit to authorities are issued by Peter around this time, so Paul is not alone (1 Peter 2:13).<sup>9</sup> Followers of Jesus are thus admonished to be good examples and citizens as a matter of conscience, and this also implies acting as far as conscience will allow, which some translations fail to note.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, the point here is not to assert the divine right of kings; it is to call for respecting governments and conventional codes as upstanding members of society.

## **2) Calling for Unquestioning Obedience to Morally Flawed Codes or Commands.**

Nor does this passage call for Christians to obey morally flawed laws or unethical commands, even if they are enforced or asserted by legitimate authorities. Among the most egregious affronts to Christian moral conscience is the insistence upon obeying codes or commanders that go against the clear commands of God. Hierarchical legitimation of such an action might be appealed to as a means of excusing responsibility, if one is simply carrying out orders of a superior or following a law, but such justifications for the Christian are hollow and wrong. “The culpability is the superiors’, not the individual’s,” so the thinking goes. Thus, the guilt of the death-camp exterminator is not on the head of the compliant soldier; it lies with his superior or those giving the orders. The calculation here is understandable, as the cog in a wheel is only one part of a larger mechanism. Or, as the brothers Niebuhr pointed out, at times moral persons are ensnared

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<sup>9</sup> Paul also counsels being subject to rulers in Titus 3:1, but Romans 13:1 is the only place in which a New Testament author mentions rulers’ being established by God.

<sup>10</sup> The best translation of διὰ τὴν συνείδησιν in Romans 13:5 is not “because of conscience” in my view (versus the NRSV and some other translations) but “according to conscience.” Thus, conscientious citizens should obey the codes of governments, but they should also not go against conscience in doing so. See also P. Lee, “Conscience in Romans 13:5,” *Faith and Mission* 8 (1990): 85-93; C. A. Pierce, *Conscience in the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1955) 66-74.



within immoral societies. Evil can be structural as well as personal. That being the case, though, such a stance cannot be legitimated on the basis of Romans 13. The particular issue addressed in verses 6-7 is the willingness to pay Roman taxes. Paul does not alleviate culpability for murder, violence, cheating, or other morally reprehensible acts on the basis of hierarchical instrumentality.

Along these lines, the New Testament message is clear, especially in the teachings of Jesus and the admonitions of the Apocalypse. Followers of Jesus are expected to be faithful to the way of Christ, even if it involves sharing in the cup of his suffering and ingesting his flesh, given for the life of the world on the cross (Mark 10:38-39; John 6:51-70).<sup>11</sup> The Son of Man must suffer and die, and so must his followers be willing to embrace the way of the cross if they expect to be raised with him in the afterlife (Mark 8:28-34). Likewise, those who persevere in faithfulness, despite hardship and persecution, will be rewarded by Christ in the end (Revelation 2-3). Or, as Paul outlines in Romans 6, the hope of sharing with Christ in his resurrection hinges upon being willing share with him in his crucifixion and death. Therefore, Romans 13 cannot be rightly used to justify committing violence or ill simply because one is enmeshed in structural evil. If anything, followers of Christ are subject to divinely ordered conscience above earthly codes and commands.

This point was argued historically by Continental biblical scholars and others, especially following the aftermath of World War I, and in opposition to the rise of the Third Reich. If Christ is Lord, Caesar cannot be.<sup>12</sup> While some scholars have tried to see the work of Christ furthered through the state, such a view is untenable biblically.<sup>13</sup> Not only does Peter declare that believers must obey God rather than man (Acts 4:19; 5:29; 11:17), but

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<sup>11</sup> The “bread” offered by Jesus is his flesh, offered up on the cross; thus, to ingest his flesh and blood is not a requisite of a cultic rite, is it a call to martyr-willingness if required by the truth. This is what scandalized some of Jesus’s disciples in John 6:51-66; like Mark 10:38-39 and 8:27-38, the theme here is the way of the cross. Paul N. Anderson, *The Christology of the Fourth Gospel: Its Unity and Disunity in the Light of John 6* (3<sup>rd</sup> edn. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010).

<sup>12</sup> Such was the stance of the Barman Declaration of 1934 and the Confessing Christians of Germany. See also Karl Barth, *Church and State* (London: Macmillan, 1939); G. Bornkamm, *Paul* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971) 210-16; C. E. B. Cranfield, “The Christian’s Political Responsibility According to the New Testament,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 15 (1962): 176-92.

<sup>13</sup> According to Herman Ridderbos, “However much one attempts...to establish a connection between the central christological character of Paul’s preaching and his paraenesis concerning civil authority in Romans 13, the grounds that are adduced or this are completely inadequate to justify such a radical interpretation of Romans 13.” *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, trans. John Richard de Witt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 326.

Romans 13 must also be held in tension with Revelation 13.<sup>14</sup> One cannot serve the Beast of the Apocalypse *and* the Lamb of God; loyalty to Christ always takes precedence over empire.

### **3) Maintaining Societal Order at the Expense of Justice.**

Romans 13 also at times gets cited, wrongly, as a divine-mandate justification of flawed conventional norms when they also have harmful or unjust consequences.<sup>15</sup> Far more egregious is the attribution of deplorable consequences to divine inscrutability. “Sorry, this is the law. Governments are established by God; to argue against the consequences is to go against God.” That is certainly *not* what Paul is arguing here. If anything, he furthers the way Jesus brought to people’s attention the problematic consequences of seeking to obey legal codes fully—with zero-tolerance faithfulness, whether they be the Ten Commandments or a legal ordinance—if they are at the expense of the very people such codes were intended to serve. Your tithe may be exacting, but if you’re not able to take care of your elderly parents, you’re missing the point, argues the Markan Jesus (Mark 7:9-13). Offering fitting sacrifices may be a good thing, but if the poor cannot afford the costs involved, they are excluded from the blessed life. Keeping the Sabbath may be laudable, but God’s healing and restorative work is the larger concern.

In Romans 13, Paul does not justify the enforcement of damaging or unjust regulations in the name of divine ordination, nor would he do so. He does mention that those enforcing societal laws have their jobs to do, and he acknowledges the enforcement of law as a needed conventional reality. However, he also clarifies that paying taxes is not an infraction against religious conviction or moral standards, advocating respect for law and order overall. In that sense, he furthers the wisdom of Jesus: “Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Mark 12:17). Implicit in these teachings, though, is the point that holding to God’s standards is the priority, even while calling for the orderly following of conventional legal codes. If those laws need to be changed,

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<sup>14</sup> J. L. Garrett, Jr., “The Dialectic of Romans 13:1-7 and Revelation 13: Part One,” *Journal of Church and State* 18 (1976): 433-42; “Part Two,” 19 (1977): 5-20. See also William Stringfellow, *Conscience and Obedience: The Politics of Romans 13 and Revelation 13 in the Light of the Second Coming* (Waco, TX: Word, 1977).

<sup>15</sup> See, for instance, the history of debates over uses of Romans 13:1-7 before and after Apartheid in South Africa: Bernard Lategan, “Romans 13:1-7: A Review of Post-1989 Readings,” *Scriptura: Journal for Contextual Hermeneutics in Southern Africa*, 110.1 (2012): 259-72; See Michael Cassidy, *The Passing Summer: A South African Pilgrimage in the Politics of Love* (Hodder and Stroughton, 1985) 298-99.

Christians should find ways to modify the laws; they should not attribute adverse consequences to the divine ordination of authorities or their codes.

### **III. Setting Romans 13:1-7 in its Proper Place—Between 12:9 and 13:14**

In addition to clarifying what Paul is *not* saying in Romans 13:1-7, it is also important to understand what Paul *is* saying and why. To address these issues, considering the larger context is essential—something all too few interpreters have taken care to do. As the New Testament was not ordered in terms of chapters and verses, it is wrong to read Romans 13 apart from Romans 12.<sup>16</sup> Likewise, the main thrust of verses 1-7 is carried forward in verses 8-14, so the larger context (12:9-13:14) must be considered closely if the central thrust of Romans 13:1-7 is to be understood literally and correctly. While some scholars have sought to excise this passage from its larger context due to its apparent thematic departures, it really is not out of place.<sup>17</sup> When taken together, these five paragraphs call for one thing: living in upstanding ways—gracious, nonviolent, orderly, loving, and Christlike—in order to witness compellingly to the way of Christ Jesus in the world.<sup>18</sup>

#### **1) Romans 12:9-13—Let Love Be Genuine; Extend Gracious Hospitality to Strangers.**

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

The main thrust of this text clearly admonishes hearers and readers to love others in genuine and honoring ways. This includes addressing the physical

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<sup>16</sup> The division of the New Testament into chapters and verses was not performed until 1551, when it was done by Robert Stephanus.

<sup>17</sup> Despite referencing Romans 13:1-7 as “an alien body in Paul’s exhortation” (Käsemann, *Commentary*, 352), James Dunn sees it as the central of five paragraphs, instructing believers how to live buoyantly in a hostile world. James D. G. Dunn, “Living Within a Hostile World—Rom. 12.9-13.14,” *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 674-80.

<sup>18</sup> For a number of challenges to the problematic uses of this text, see Cherice Bock, “Romans 12:17-13:10 & Quakers’ Relation to the State,” *Quaker Religious Thought* 116-117 (2011): 8-15 (<http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1026&context=qrt>). For a treatment of Romans overall, see Paul N. Anderson, *From Crisis to Christ: A Contextual Introduction to the New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2014). The texts below are taken from the NRSV.

needs of fellow believers (the saints) and extending hospitality to others (strangers). In outdoing one another in showing honor, they are actually serving the Lord. In that sense, followers of Christ are to be the most uplifting and generous members of society, zealous and ardent in spirit—rejoicing in hope, patient in suffering, and persevering in prayer. One could not imagine a more exemplary Roman citizen!

That being the case, what follows cannot be taken as an excuse for inhumane treatments of aliens or strangers, especially the traumatic separation of children from their parents. Believers are not excused in causing the suffering of others; they are likely on the receiving end of official maltreatment, not on its inflicting end. Rather, Jesus adherents are called to be patient in suffering and to persevere in prayer, serving the needs of others within and beyond their communities of faith. In his next paragraph, Paul steps up the call to faithfulness pointedly, even if believers are suffering abuse or maltreatment at the hands of Roman officials.

## **2) Romans 12:14-21—Bless Those Who Persecute You; Overcome Evil With Nonviolent Good.**

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” No, “if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

While the persecution of Christians in Rome had not yet come into full swing, as it did less than a decade later when Nero blamed the fire on those who worshiped a convicted and executed criminal (Jesus), Jesus adherents in Rome faced at least two particular obstacles during the beginning of Nero’s reign (54-68 CE). Paul himself may have gotten a reputation as a troublemaker in some sectors of the region. As mentioned

above, followers of a Jewish leader from Nazareth must have aroused suspicion among the Roman officials. The Romans finally invaded Palestine in full force in 66 CE, culminating in the siege of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE. Despite the fact that Jesus disappointed many with Jewish nationalistic hopes, his movement certainly aroused such, and even one of his followers was called Simon the Zealot (Luke 6:15). How could authorities be sure that his followers in the rest of the Empire were not insurrectionists? Additionally, as Jewish tensions in Rome were credited to controversies over “*Chrestus*” (in Claudius’s language, Suetonius, *Life of Claudius* 25.4), Jesus adherents were clearly suspected of divisiveness in the views of Roman officials, which led to distrust and likely some maltreatment.<sup>19</sup>

Even if Jesus adherents were not singled out by Romans, however, living under empire would have tested human resolve: to comply or to resist? In response to the prospect of harsh treatment by authorities, Paul here gives several admonitions, drawing upon Jewish scriptures and echoing gospel traditions, in his counsel.

- In v. 14, Paul cites the Matthean beatitude: “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.” (Matt 5:11)
- In v. 15, Paul calls for rejoicing with those who rejoice (Isa 66:10-14; Luke 15:6, 9) and weeping with those in distress (Job 2:11; John 11:19).
- In v. 16, Paul echoes the wisdom of ben Sirach: “I take pleasure in three things, and they are beautiful in the sight of God and of mortals: agreement among brothers and sisters, friendship among neighbors, and a wife and a husband who live in harmony.” (Sirach 25:1)
- In v. 16, Paul also puts the Lord’s preference for the lowly over the haughty into play (Psalm 138:6); and those who claim to see often expose their foolish blindness (John 9:41).

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<sup>19</sup> Beverly Roberts Gaventa also notes the likelihood that Christians in Rome were facing some sorts of tensions with the governing powers in Rome, which Paul apparently seeks to alleviate: “Reading Romans 13 with Simone Weil: Toward a More Generous Hermeneutic,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 136.1 (2017): 7-21. Or, as Käsemann points out, Paul is not speaking in general terms here, the particular “relationships of the Hellenistic period determine the field of view” (*Romans*) 354.

- In v. 17, Paul cites Proverbs 20:22 (as does 1 Peter 3:9): “Do not say, ‘I will repay evil’; wait for the LORD, and he will help you.”
- In v. 19, Paul cites Deuteronomy 32:35 (as does Hebrews 10:30), reminding believers that they are not to avenge wrongs; they are to remember that vengeance is the Lord’s to repay, not theirs.
- In v. 20, Paul cites directly Proverbs 25:21-22 (echoed in the teachings of Jesus: Matt 5:44): “If your enemies are hungry, give them bread to eat; and if they are thirsty, give them water to drink; for you will heap coals of fire on their heads, and the LORD will reward you.”

In the two verses not citing Jewish or Jesus traditions directly in this paragraph, Paul’s main thesis is stated in a twofold way. First, “If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.” (v. 18) Second, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” (v. 21) Therefore, Paul’s main thrust in this passage is pacifistic, calling for followers of Jesus to adhere to the “Third Way” of Jesus as a traditional call to nonviolent action. Rather than respond to domination in terms of *fight or flight*—the former resulting in forcible defeat, the latter resulting in acquiescent subservience—Paul advocates seizing the initiative and returning love for hate, kindness for force, good for evil.<sup>20</sup> The larger goal is to pique the conscience of the other, showing the irresistibility of loving action and gracious regard. Thus, in following the way of Jesus and its Jewish precedents, Paul arms his audiences with the tools needed to win the hearts and minds of authorities and others in Rome by their compelling and nonviolent actions and reactions.

### **3) Romans 13:1-7—Obey the Governing Authorities; Abide in Orderly Good Conscience.**

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will

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<sup>20</sup> See here the work of Walter Wink, who sees Jesus as posing a third alternative to the leveraged fight-flight dichotomies of domination-oriented governance: *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1992). See also Wink’s treatment of Romans 13:1-7 in his *Naming the Powers I* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 45-47.

receive its approval; for it is God's servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience. For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, busy with this very thing. Pay to all what is due them—taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due.

When this paragraph is taken as following upon the previous two, its content is clarified. Here Paul is not saying, "Because God has instituted governmental authorities, they are always right, and you must obey the government even if its laws and their enforcements are immoral and unjust." Nor is Paul saying, "Law and order must prevail at the expense of the vulnerable," or "Those who break a law deserve the punishment that follows." Paul's main interest is for followers of Jesus to represent the Jesus movement with integrity and honor—adhering to conventional codes of conduct, including the paying of Roman taxes—in order that the hearts and minds of others might be won over by the virtuous and honorable behavior and demeanor of believers. If Jesus adherents are abiding by conventional and societal laws, they have nothing to fear from Roman officials. However, if people break the law, they subject themselves to jeopardy because those charged with maintaining order have their own responsibilities to carry forth. This does not legitimate the use of violence by authorities, however; the thrust of Paul's message here simply seeks to embolden compelling Christian witness by believers' upstanding and exemplary societal behavior.

Several additional features of this paragraph are worth considering, however, as they relate to its fitting and flawed interpretations. First, the societal position of the messenger is significant. Paul is not acting as a governmental official, calling people to obey his mandates and minions in carrying out his policies. He is not someone in charge of governmental laws and their enforcements but is acting as a concerned citizen, calling for peers to get along with the laws of the land as a fellow subject. Thus, governmental authorities ought not use this paragraph to bolster their own authority. Second, Paul is not defending unjust laws. He is appealing for adherence to generally acceptable conventions and is not defending unethical statutes or their abusive implementations. Third, Paul is not saying that governments are always right because they are instituted by God, nor is he saying that

those who have been entrusted “the ministry of the sword” (a terribly abused reference, historically) are justified in carrying out their charges by violence or force. If laws are flawed in principle or in their implementation, Paul would likely advocate changing or defying the law conscientiously versus unthinking acquiescence.

Again, the main point of this paragraph is signaled by the appeals to virtuous action in the larger context. Paul is not establishing the divine right of kings; he is not justifying injustice; he is not calling for the ignoring of conscience in the name of legal adherence; he is not legitimating abusive regulations or their harsh enforcement. He is calling for exemplary living in order to win over the hearts and minds of the citizens and authorities of Rome, and this endeavor comes especially clear in the following paragraphs. The greatest law to be followed is that of *love*—that is the main point of verses 1-7 as well as verses 8-10 in Romans 13—literally.

With Emil Brunner regarding Romans 13:1-7, “Yet the remarkable fact remains that these explanations are incorporated between two instructions concerning Christian love! ...To confront the representatives of a political power with the intention of giving them their due, is an outworking of love.”<sup>21</sup>

#### **4) Romans 13:8-10—Follow the Law of Love; Love Fulfills the Laws of God and the Laws of the Land.**

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet”; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

Speaking of debts, far above taxation in its importance is the debt of love. This debt must continually be repaid in the commands to love God and one another. Here Paul again quotes Jewish scripture regarding the humanity-oriented admonitions of the Mosaic Law (Lev 19:11-18), and in keeping with the teachings of Jesus, the second priority of the Ten Commandments

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<sup>21</sup> Emil Brunner, *The Letter to the Romans: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1959) 110.



involves the love of neighbor as oneself (Mark 12:31). As biblical interpreters too seldom note, this paragraph is the culminative crown of Paul's overall argument here. It is in loving one another, the stranger, the alien, and even one's enemies that the higher Law of God is fulfilled, and this is a matter of conscience and witness.

#### **5) Romans 13:11-14—Put on the Lord Jesus Christ; Living Honorably as in the Day, not the Night.**

Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Paul concludes this section with the larger, cosmic picture in view, calling for believers to wake from their sleep and to live as children of the day and light rather than as those who slumber in the night and walk in darkness. It is because salvation is at hand that believers are to live in ways pleasing to the Lord, living honorably before God and humanity alike. The compelling witness of Jesus adherents not only involves forgiving, gracious, lawful, and loving actions, but it also includes selfless and upstanding moral behaviors, free from such vices as drunkenness, debauchery, licentiousness, quarreling, and jealousy. These values would have been embraced by Stoic philosophers and Jewish leaders alike in Rome, and they would have bolstered the esteem for believers within Greco-Roman society overall.

#### **IV. What Romans 13:1-7 Is Saying, and What It Is Not**

When Romans 13:1-7 is interpreted within its contextual setting, the main thrust of its content calls for Jesus adherents to live in upstanding, exemplary ways in order to be a good witness to the way of Christ. It appropriates Jewish and Roman views of divine origins of ordered governance as a means of calling for respectful compliance with conventional laws, but it does not argue that governments are always right or acting on God's behalf in what they require or how they behave. Therefore, it is important to establish what

this passage is saying, and even more importantly to clarify what it is not, reading it within its larger context.

Thus, within its larger context, Romans 13:1-7 *is* saying:

- Live in loving and respectful ways, letting love be genuine and extending gracious hospitality to all, including strangers, as well as loving one another (Ro 12:9-13).
- Bless those who persecute you, live peaceably with others, love your enemies and neighbors, and overcome evil by doing good (Ro 12:14-21).
- Obey the authorities, pay your taxes, comply with official codes conscientiously, and live in upstanding and virtuous ways (Ro 13:1-7).
- Above all, follow the law of love, for in so doing, the laws of God and society alike are fulfilled (Ro 13:8-10).
- Therefore, put on the Lord Jesus Christ and live in ways pleasing to God and society as a Christian witness in the world (Ro 13:11-14).

Likewise, within its larger context, Romans 13:1-7 *is not* saying:

- Because God has established governments, you must obey official codes and commands as obedience to God; governments and their servants are always right.
- If official statutes or their implementation are morally problematic, Christians are to follow them no matter what, regardless of conscience or justice concerns.
- Officials who carry out their disciplinary actions are justified in using violence or force; those breaking laws have it coming to them.
- Governmental institutions established by God take precedence over family structures and relational concerns, because God cares more about governments than family units and their members' wellbeing.
- The reign of Christ is accomplished through the ruling of governors; the kingdom of God hinges upon the thriving of worldly empires.

In a season where the pejorative disparaging of one's political opponents is common currency, sources of value will be used rhetorically, and the Bible is no exception. However, using the Bible effectively hinges upon its adequate interpretation. Indeed, the Bible also calls for loving strangers,

caring for aliens, suffering children, providing for widows and orphans, and keeping families together. Thus, citing Romans 13:1-7 does not cut it when defending a policy that separates children from parents, either for legal or for legalistic reasons. Then again, images of stressed children represent one part of the picture, but immigration issues are far more complex than that. On this point, Jeff Sessions' less-cited statement is also worthy of consideration: "Orderly and lawful processes are good in themselves. Consistent, fair application of law is in itself a good and moral thing, and it protects the weak; it protects the lawful." This is a good point, as worthy laws and statutes function to protect the vulnerable as well as to maintain order. The question is how to get there, when a nation's immigration policies are inadequate to field the realities on the ground.

What is needed is for the three branches of government to cooperate together and to come up with a long-term solution to the complex issues related to immigration pressures on the Mexican-American border. Restoring discretion to judges and allowing family units to be kept together may alleviate some of the tension, one hopes. Over the long haul, though, Congress needs to pass an overall solution that cares for dreamers and also provides a manageable approach to immigration that works. In the light of Romans 12:9-13:14, a legal solution that is gracious, hospitable, humane, just, ordered, and loving could really provide the way forward.

On this matter, Paul's admonition to Timothy is especially timely: "I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity." (1 Tim 2:1-2) In addition to finding ways forward regarding keeping families together and making immigration manageable, one wonders if another answer to prayer might yet be forthcoming. Might we also find ways forward not only in not abusing biblical texts, but even more importantly, avoiding the flawed use of biblical texts to justify abusive measures, even if well-meaning in their design and/or their implementation? Now *that* would be impressive, given that children, families, and social concerns are ever the biblical priorities, as love of God and neighbor are fulfilled in their needs being addressed. If we could correct the interpretive abuse of this particular biblical text, perhaps that would stave off at least the justifying of some correlative abuse.