

Sermons through

# Romans

## God's Ministers

*Romans 13:1-7*

*Part Five*

*Render To All Their Due*

*With Study Questions*

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# God's Ministers

*Romans 13:1-7*

*Part Five*

*Render To All Their Due*

Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. <sup>2</sup>Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves. <sup>3</sup>For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. <sup>4</sup>For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to *execute* wrath on him who practices evil. <sup>5</sup>Therefore *you* must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience' sake. <sup>6</sup>For because of this you also pay taxes, for they are God's ministers attending continually to this very thing. <sup>7</sup>Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes *are due*, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor (Romans 13:1-7).

## Review

We are called in this passage to have a proper, submissive and respectful disposition toward those in leadership, lest we find ourselves resisting **"the authority"** and **"ordinance of God"** (Romans 13:2). They may not acknowledge that they are God's servants/ministers, but we should nonetheless. A lack of submission may result in our bringing **"judgment"** on ourselves. This is not God's final judgment but judgment within the realm of civil justice.

It does not follow from this, that these authorities are ultimate. We must always be willing to defer to the higher authority, which is God speaking through the Scriptures. Even though **"rulers"** in a general sense are used by God as a **"terror"** to **"evil"**, we recognize that those who do good (as with Jesus Himself) may find themselves suffering if they **"obey God rather than men"** (Acts 5:29). We should know who our ultimate

authority is and what He requires of us. In light of the behavior of 'God appointed' lower authorities this can be difficult to ascertain.

In our last meeting we discussed the proper use of the "sword", which was a device of execution. The Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments provide a model which lays a foundation upon which we can build a proper understanding of that which falls into the category of criminal activity-a category where use of "the sword" is appropriate. The proper use of the sword (the proper administering justice) is not left to the wisdom or whim or man but to God. All of this requires a proper understanding of the laws of God and how they might apply in modern society. Again, no easy task.

Paul continues:

**Therefore *you* must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience' sake (Romans 13:5).**

### **For Conscience Sake**

I was once asked by a young Christian man if the government's power to punish evil-doers was the only thing that gave that government its legitimate authority. He was convinced that if the government lost its power to enforce it lost its attending authority. The above verse seems to argue against such a position.

We are to subject ourselves to those put in authority over us (whether political, familial, ecclesiastical, i.e. at home, work, church, etc.) simply because it is the right thing to do. As Paul writes, "**for conscience' sake.**" Conscience *syneidesin* is the faculty within our minds/hearts which distinguishes between right and wrong. We must also consider that our conscience is itself subject to the fall and, therefore, flawed. The conscience must, consequently, be governed by the word of God.

The point here is that even if the magistrate were deprived of the sword or the parent deprived of the rod or the boss deprived of the power to fire, we are to continue to acknowledge their God-given post with respect and submission. All this because it is right.

**For because of this you also pay taxes, for they are God's ministers attending continually to this very thing (Romans 13:6).**

## Paying Taxes

The Apostle now brings up the touchy topic of taxes. We again find ourselves in the difficult situation of seeking to apply current western thinking to an ancient middle eastern document. A common western political refrain is *no taxation without representation*. In other words, if I (or someone who represents me) doesn't have a seat at the political table, then you have no right to tax me.

The principle of representation is a sound one. A good argument can be made for this as a biblical approach of government. It is a Presbyterian approach where the congregations elect elders/deacons who govern the church. We therefore seek to preserve, or work toward it. But what we have in this verse is remarkable! The "**tax**" *phorous* of which Paul writes is a tribute tax. That is to say, it is a payment made by the people of one nation to another nation as a symbol of submission and dependence.

Among the many false accusations of Jesus before Pilate, we read of one utilizing this word (tax, tribute, *phorous*):

**And they began to accuse him, saying, "We found this man misleading our nation and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar, and saying that he himself is Christ, a king" (Luke 23:2).**

Again, this is not an argument in favor of political passivity on the one hand or government overthrow on the other (if taxation were to become pure unworkable theft). What we gather from this verse is a general submissive and cooperative disposition that we are to have toward God's ministers in the political arena. Even in a system where there is taxation without representation!

The word "**minister**" *leitourgoi* in this verse is different than the word "**minister**" used twice in verse four. In verse four it is the more general word *diakonos*, meaning servant. Minister used in verse five speaks more specifically of a public office. Let us not underestimate the difficulty here and the general disposition the faithful are called to have in the public arena.

Paul is writing to largely subjugated people who are paying taxes (tribute) to unelected politicians who “**continually**” operate in that position of authority over them. And all indications are the taxes were very high.

**Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes *are due*, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor (Romans 13:7).**

## **Render**

Paul sums up his exhortation, repeating their responsibility to pay taxes, including customs (these two terms likely included property tax, head tax, poll tax, taxes on goods and services, etc.). “**Fear**” likely beckons back to verse four, speaking of the legitimate fear law-breakers should have of the authorities and honor time is the assignment of respect for a person of a certain status. As Peter wrote:

**Honor all *people*. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king (1 Peter 2:17).**

The Apostle uses the same words in the beginning of the verse that Jesus used in a confrontation with His detractors. The word “**render**” *apodote* which means to give or to do something necessary in fulfillment of an obligation or expectation. Since we have been speaking of the relationship between the Christian faith and government, I thought it would be appropriate to finish this series with a brief discussion of that encounter. Especially since it is one of the most well-known and misapplied phrases in all of Scripture.

The phrase for us to consider is, “**Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s**” (Matthew 22:21).

The setting for this phrase is found in an event where two warring factions (the Pharisees and the Herodians) found a common enemy in Christ and sought to “**entangle Him in His talk**” (Matthew 22:15), an effort that never ends well for the antagonist of Christ. Jesus is asked a simple, yet loaded question.

**Tell us, therefore, what do You think? Is it lawful to pay taxes**

## to Caesar, or not (Matthew 22:17)?

It was a loaded question because the Herodians (who the Jews viewed as sell-outs to the Romans) thought that the Jews should get on board as Roman citizens and pay taxes and take part in the Roman community regardless of how pagan or idolatrous it might be. The Pharisees thought that to pay taxes was a tacit approval of the false gods of Rome. They now throw Jesus in the middle of their controversy.

If Jesus says 'yes' to paying taxes, He would be accused of endorsing the pantheon (many gods) of Rome or Caesar's claim of deity (One coin inscription read, "Tiberius Caesar Augustus, son of the Divine Augustus"). If Jesus says 'no' to paying taxes, He would be accused of rebellion against authority.

## Rebellion Against Caesar?

Bringing Caesar into the discussion was also their way opening the door for a public execution. The Pharisees had no authority to put anyone to death (John 18:31). Only the Romans could do this. But the Romans didn't care about some Jewish cult called Christianity. Gallio, who was the Roman proconsul in Achaia, demonstrates Rome's indifference:

**If it were a matter of wrongdoing or wicked crimes, O Jews, there would be reason why I should bear with you. <sup>15</sup> But if it is a question of words and names and your own law, look to it yourselves; for I do not want to be a judge of such *matters*" (Acts 18:14b-15).**

But if they could accuse Jesus of rebellion against Caesar, that would be a different matter. And even though Jesus' answer to this question could in no way be construed as rebellious, He would be accused of it nonetheless.

**Then the whole multitude of them arose and led Him to Pilate. <sup>2</sup> And they began to accuse Him, saying, "We found this *fellow* perverting the nation, and forbidding to pay taxes to Caesar, saying that He Himself is Christ, a King" (Luke 23:1,**

2).

So how would Jesus answer this question?

**But Jesus perceived their wickedness, and said, “Why do you test Me, *you* hypocrites” (Matthew 22:18)?**

Before giving His answer, Jesus would expose their duplicitous hearts. A hypocrite, contrary to popular opinion, is not a weak person or a person who fails in their pursuit of holiness or piety – that’s a human person. A hypocrite is someone who pretends to be something they aren’t.

They were pretending to be students. They were pretending to want answers and know and follow the truth. But the answer was not going to be the answer to their petty controversy. The answer would contain something deeper, much more vital to their very souls.

**“Show Me the tax money.” So they brought Him a denarius. <sup>20</sup> And He said to them, “Whose image and inscription is this” (Matthew 22:19, 20)?**

Jesus calls them to take an active part in His response. He would not allow this to be some sort of theoretical discussion of ‘what ifs’. They would have to find a coin and they would have to answer His question regarding the image on the coin.

And whose image was it on the coin and why is that significant?

**They said to Him, “Caesar’s” (Matthew 22:21a).**

They would find the coin, look at the coin and state with their own lips that it was the image of Caesar on the coin. You wonder how loudly this rang in the hearts of the chief priests when they would later take the mark of the beast with their confession:

**We have no king but Caesar (John 19:15)!**

It is a critical error for men to think that the patience of God means that our sin will not find us out. Jesus taught:

**But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment (Matthew 12:36).**

They stood before Jesus beckoning Him to strain at their gnats. Should they pay taxes to Caesar? Frankly the question isn't even answered here. A bigger question is answered; one that they clearly ignored when they would confess Caesar, not merely as one who receives their taxes, but receives their ultimate allegiance.

People seek to put God at the defendant's table with their juvenile questions and objections. But it is man who sits at the defendant's table. It is man, not God, who is on trial. And unless our lawyer – our Advocate – is Jesus – and unless our defense is mere confession of sin and utter dependence upon the blood of the one who defends us, we lose.

We then read Christ's answer to the question. One of the most highly misinterpreted answers in modern Christianity.

**And He said to them, "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (Matthew 22:21b).**

So well-known is the phrase, that the *Dictionary of Cultural Literacy* suggests that if we've never heard these words, we are woefully unacquainted with the culture in which we live.

But the more popular a passage is, the more likely we've heard it misused; and this phrase is no exception. Before we discuss it means, let's discuss what it does not mean.

I don't think by saying this, Jesus is (as suggested by nearly everyone I heard quote it) suspending God's ownership of, and jurisdiction over, all things.

**The earth is the Lord's, and all its fullness, The world and those who dwell therein (Psalm 24:1).**

There are some who offer a theory, using this verse, of dividing the world into areas belonging to Caesar (or other kings or presidents) and other areas belonging to God – each with exclusive jurisdiction. This verse



becomes a proof-text for God's relative indifference toward government. Williams S. Barker, Professor of Church History at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia offers an example of this kind of thinking:

**"...it was not a compromise of Jesus' commitment to the things of God to pay the tax to Caesar, even with Caesar's blasphemous religion on the coin. In the New Testament situation, under a Gentile regime, he did not expect the civil authority to support the true religion."<sup>1</sup>**

He also states,

**Clearly Jesus recognized Caesar's prerogatives in the latter area of human relations, but Caesar was not to infringe on our liberty, nor was he expected to enforce the true faith and worship, in the former area of our relationship to God<sup>2</sup>.**

What is meant by the government enforcing the "true faith and worship" we haven't time to pursue here. It is not my purpose here to argue for the responsibility of kings to bow before the King of kings and trust in the King's word (contained in the Old and New Testaments – as opposed to whatever supposed godly inclinations that might flow from their natures) as the mean by which they govern; although that would be my thesis.

My point here, as I lead into my final point of this message, is that these words of Jesus do not at all address what responsibilities Caesar may or may not have. I agree with R. E. Brown in Jerome's commentary where he writes:

**Effectively his answer evades the question rather than solves it. He does not appeal to right but simply to the *de facto* existence of Caesar's power, symbolized by Caesar's coinage. Whether Caesar has a right to rule is not touched by the answer.<sup>3</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> William S. Barker, *Theonomy, a Reformed Critique*, (Zondervan, 1990), p. 236

<sup>2</sup>Barker, p. 237

<sup>3</sup>Brown, R. E. (1996, c1968). *The Jerome Biblical commentary* (Mt 22:20). Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.

**The explanation, “Give Caesar what is his and God what is his,” offers no basis for a theory of politics. Jesus certainly did not intend to divide the world into areas belonging to Caesar and God, each with his respective and exclusive jurisdiction. Nor did he answer the question what belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God.<sup>4</sup>**

Those who use this passage as an argument for Christians to disengage in the world of politics is an example of missing the proverbial point. To be candid, the point has little to do with politics at all. The point Jesus makes can be offered in a question:

**Will you trust in God or will your trust in man? Will you give your soul to God or will you give your soul to man?**

Caesar, and the nation under Him, offered the epitome of man’s effort. Jesus was not gerrymandering the districts of God and Caesar. He was challenging His listeners to trust in either man or God. When Paul writes that we are to **“render...taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor,”** he is not setting up a false dichotomy. He is not suggesting for a minute that we are not to render all to Christ.

As Abraham Kuyper said:

**There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, Mine!**

And it is one of the great moments in our human experience when we come to realize that we are owned by Christ.

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<sup>4</sup>Brown, R. E. (1996, c1968). *The Jerome Biblical commentary* (Mt 22:20). Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.

## Questions for Study

1. Review the first four verses of Romans 13. What is the general message? How has this affected the way you think and act (pages 2, 3)?
2. Is the sword the only reason we should obey governing authorities? Can our conscience always be trusted? Explain (page 3).
3. What should our attitude be toward taxation (page 4)?
4. What does the word “render” mean (page 5)?
5. How were the Herodians and Pharisees seeking to entangle Jesus (pages 5, 6)?
6. What does it mean to be a hypocrite (pages 6, 7)?
7. How was declaring Caesar as their only king taking the mark of the beast (page 7)?
8. What does it mean to render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s”? What does it not mean (pages 8-10)?
9. What does it mean to be owned by Christ (page 10)?

