

119

MINISTRIES

“The following is a direct script of a teaching that is intended to be presented via video, incorporating relevant text, slides, media, and graphics to assist in illustration, thus facilitating the presentation of the material. In some places, this may cause the written material to not flow or sound rather awkward in some places. In addition, there may be grammatical errors that are often not acceptable in literary work. We encourage the viewing of the video teachings to complement the written teaching you see below.”

Subjecting Ourselves to Governing Authorities (Romans 13:1-7)

In Romans 13:1-7, Paul gives instructions that believers are to “be subject to governing authorities.” He says God has instituted these authorities and that those who resist them will incur judgment. He calls these authorities God’s servants and ministers to whom we must give honor and pay taxes.

Let’s take a look at the passage:

Romans 13:1-7

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.

Traditionally, this passage has been interpreted as Paul’s instructions regarding the believer’s obligations to the secular government. It’s often been said that believers ought to be submissive to the secular government because the government is instituted by God.

Of course, this interpretation has raised some ethical questions. Does God want us to obey secular laws, even when they are unjust? Should we be subject to governments that are genuinely evil, like the regimes of Stalin or Hitler?

It’s worthwhile to think through how we should live under the governance of secular authorities. Regardless of how one reads Romans 13, there are other passages encouraging believers to be good citizens and to be subject to those who hold positions of governmental authority (e.g., 1 Peter 2:13-17; 1

Timothy 2:2). However, there are also biblical passages that promote principles of civil disobedience in some situations (Exodus 1:15-21; Daniel 3, 6; Esther 4:16). In fact, the very proclamation of Yeshua as king was against the decrees of Caesar in the first century (Acts 17:6-7). So, while the Bible acknowledges the authority of secular governments, it also does not consider that authority to be absolute.

Much literature has been devoted to wrestling with the issue of subjection to secular governments. Romans 13:1-7 may be the most significant passage related to this discussion. As we said earlier, most interpret these verses to mean that secular governments are instituted by God, and therefore we ought to submit to secular authorities. However, we'd like to propose an alternative interpretation of this controversial passage in Romans.

An Alternative Interpretation

In this teaching, we will defend the position that the “governing authorities” mentioned in Romans 13 are not secular authorities at all, but are actually religious authorities—namely, the Jewish synagogue authorities. This interpretation might seem questionable at first but bear with us as we make our case. After we explain this interpretation and see if it makes exegetical sense, we will spend a little bit of time discussing the implications of this interpretation and what principles might be applied today.

First, let's look at this passage in Romans within its historical context. One way of constructing the historical context is to identify the original recipients of Paul's letter. It seems clear that Paul is writing *specifically* to Gentile believers in Rome (Romans 1:13; 11:13-14; 15:15-16). Nevertheless, the community to which Paul writes is made up of both Jews and Gentiles. For instance, scholars have pointed out that the list of names in Paul's greetings includes five undoubtedly Jewish names (Romans 16:1-16). Moreover, many of Paul's instructions assume a social setting that involves regular interaction with Jews (Romans 11:11-36). Paul also expects his readers to be highly familiar with the Scriptures (Romans 7:1; 15:4), yet it's unlikely that Gentile believers at this time would even have had access to the Scriptures outside of the synagogue where they were read.

For these and other reasons, some scholars have suggested that Paul was writing to a synagogue community in Rome. Is this possible?

Well, we know that the earliest believers—both Jews and Gentiles—continued to meet in the Jewish synagogues (Acts 13:13-52; 14:1-6; 17:1-5; 18:4). The apostle James expected that the new Gentile believers in Messiah would attend the synagogue services *every Sabbath* to be instructed in the Torah (Acts 15:21). The “assembly” mentioned in chapter 2 of James' own epistle is the Greek word for synagogue (James 2:2), suggesting that James' letter was addressed to believers who met in the synagogue.

Not only that, but there are historical reasons to think that Gentile believers in Rome wouldn't have even been able to assemble outside of the synagogue during the time of Paul's letter. According to Josephus, Julius Caesar's decree prohibited religious gatherings in Rome, except for Jewish gatherings (*Ant.* 14.10.8). First-century Roman historian, Suetonius, writes that Caesar himself “dissolved all guilds, except those of ancient foundation” (*Julius Caesar* 42.3). Thus, it's reasonable to think the Gentile believers would have sought association with the Jewish synagogue, which was already established and recognized as having permission to congregate in Rome.

Given these considerations, it's certainly possible—maybe even likely—that Paul was writing to a

synagogue community. Theologian Tim Hegg writes:

There is no reason to think that the congregation in Rome to whom Paul wrote was anything but a synagogue community.

-Tim Hegg, *Paul's Epistle to the Romans* (Tacoma, WA: TorahResource, 2007), Vol. 1., p. 2

With this historical setting considered, it's not unreasonable to imagine that Gentile believers who attended the Jewish synagogue services in Rome were the target audience of Paul's letter. Consequently, much of Paul's teaching in Romans aimed to maintain harmony between Jews and Gentiles within the synagogue gatherings. This required instruction to his Gentile readers to live so as not to offend the Jews who had not yet received Messiah.

What we propose, then, is that Paul's instructions in Romans 13:1-7 specifically pertain to the inner-community issues within the synagogues in Rome. And thus, the authorities to which Paul refers are the synagogue authorities.

New Testament scholar, Mark Nanos, is one scholar who espouses this view. Here is what he says:

It is my contention that Paul's instructions in 13:1-7 are not concerned with the state, empire, or any other such organization of secular government. His concern was rather to address the obligation of Christians, particularly Christian gentiles associating with the synagogues of Rome for the practice of their new "faith," to subordinate themselves to the leaders of the synagogues and to the customary "rules of behavior" that had been developed in Diaspora synagogues for defining the appropriate behavior of "righteous gentiles" seeking association with Jews and their God.

-Mark Nanos, *The Mystery of Romans* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), p. 291

So, according to Nanos, Paul's instructions in Romans 13:1-7 are about the Jewish authorities of *the synagogues* in Rome, not secular Roman authorities. Paul says that believers—particularly Gentile believers—ought to subject themselves to the synagogue leadership and follow their behavioral guidelines for fellowship, even though most of these synagogue authorities probably did not believe that Yeshua is the Messiah.

According to Paul, the stumbling of some of the Jewish people made it possible for salvation to come to the Gentiles (Romans 11:11-15, 25-32). Therefore, Gentile believers are indebted to the Jewish people and are to love them and live peaceably with them (Romans 12:16-18; 14:19). This would call for Gentile believers to even obey Jewish *halakhot*—rules of behavior—governing synagogue fellowship for the sake of peace and not causing those who are weak to stumble (Romans 14). For instance, believers are encouraged to avoid eating common meats purchased from the marketplace since it would have offended the Jews of the Roman synagogues, even though there was nothing in Scripture prohibiting such meats (Romans 14:13-23; 15:1-7).

For more on the issues Paul deals with in Romans 14, see our teaching, [The Pauline Paradox: Romans](#).

Again, Paul's goal was to maintain peace within the synagogue gatherings. He also wanted to encourage his Gentile readers not to be arrogant toward the unbelieving Jews. By their love and humility, Paul hoped that his Gentile readers would inspire the Jewish people to come to salvation through Messiah

(Romans 11:11-36).

One advantage of our interpretation is that it harmonizes Romans 13:1-7 with Paul's overall teaching in this section of Romans. Commentators have long thought it unusual for Paul to interject an exhortation to submit to secular government in the midst of his instructions dealing with inner-community issues (Romans 12:1-15:13). The passage has always seemed out of place. Some have even suggested that this section must have been taken from a different letter and later added to this one.

However, if the interpretation we are defending is correct, this section fits nicely within the larger section of Paul's instructions dealing with inner-community issues. As Nanos writes:

“Let every person be in subjection to the governing authorities” begins what has traditionally been regarded as an abrupt transition, lacking either conjunction or joining particle, and with a change to third person. **This topos has been regarded as a major change of topic, often beyond the grasp of many to reconcile with the surrounding context.** Nevertheless, Paul wrote this paraenetic topos as though there was no major transition in topic from the issues he was in the midst of addressing in chapter 12, and which he then picked up again without the usual marks of transition in 13:8 [...] **I suggest that there is no conjunction to announce a break in Paul's larger paraenetical concerns of 12:1-15:13 because there is no conceptual change of focus in 13:1-7.** The entire section, including “every person” of 13:1-7, is concerned with addressing the new lifestyle of the Christian gentiles in response to the gospel's revelation of the “mercies of God” toward themselves, so that they would be committed to “proper behavior” in the congregation of the people of God to which they now belong as new members of the synagogues of Rome through their “introduction” by “faith” in Christ Jesus.

-Mark Nanos, *The Mystery of Romans* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), pp. 294-295

A second advantage of our interpretation is that the language used to describe these authorities seems to fit better with the idea that these are religious authorities. Paul says these governing authorities derive their authority “from God” (Romans 13:1). They are rulers who are not a terror to good behavior but to evil (Romans 13:3). They are “servants of God” and “ministers of God” (Romans 13:4-6) to whom reverence and honor are due (Romans 13:7).

It's difficult to believe that Paul would use such unmitigated language for secular Roman officials. As Mark Nanos argues, neither Paul nor any other first-century Jew was blind to the empire's evils. Furthermore, if Paul wanted to recommend a level of compliance with secular authorities, there would be no need to invest such Roman officials with a commission from God to do so. And we see elsewhere in Scripture that Paul was not shy about criticizing secular authorities (1 Corinthians 2:8; 6:1).

Additionally, there is some lexical support for the idea that these authorities are synagogue authorities. Scripture uses the word “authority” (ἐξουσίαν) to describe the authority Paul was granted “from the chief priests” before he came to know Yeshua as Messiah (Acts 9:14; 26:10-12). Yeshua also refers to those in synagogue government as “authorities” (Luke 12:11).

These parallels are significant to our passage in Romans. As Nanos writes:

We have then a parallel use of “authorities” in Luke and in Acts applied similarly in Romans 13:1-7. The references in Luke and Acts take place clearly in the context of synagogue government and in the context of the role of their “authority” vis-a-vis enforcement of the

confessional and behavioral requirements of the Jewish community; and in the case of Acts, in the context of Paul's own experience with synagogue "authority" in its disciplinary role. It would be natural for Paul to apply this same language in Romans if he was addressing Christians, particularly Christian *gentiles*, meeting in the context of the synagogue, perhaps under some duress, and beginning to question the extent of their obligation to the "authorities" therein.

-Mark Nanos, *The Mystery of Romans* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), p. 304

So, we see that the word is used in the context of synagogue authority and in the context of such authorities functioning in a disciplinary role, which fits our passage.

The word "rulers" (ἄρχοντες) is also used of religious leaders, including synagogue leaders, many times in the New Testament (Luke 8:41; 24:20; John 3:1; 7:48; 12:42; Acts 3:17; 4:5, 8; 14:5; 23:5).

Of course, the title of "servant/minister" (διάκονός) has religious connotations. It's the word used for the title of "deacon" (1 Timothy 3:8, 12).

Finally, there is a different Greek word translated "ministers" (λειτουργοί) in verse 6, concerning the collection of taxes. In the New Testament, this word's usage draws from the priestly functions. In chapter 15 of Romans, Paul uses this word again in this exact context:

Romans 15:15-16

But on some points I have written to you very boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace given me by God to be a minister [λειτουργὸν] of Christ Jesus [Messiah Yeshua] to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

We'll talk more about the significance of this word a little later. But right now, the idea that these are *religious authorities* to whom Paul refers seems to offer a more coherent explanation of this language.

However, while there are certainly some advantages to accepting the interpretation that Paul refers to religious authorities in Romans 13, there are also some difficulties. For instance, how do we understand Paul's statement that these authorities "bear the sword"? Wouldn't that make more sense if Paul were talking about Roman rather than synagogue officials? Also, how does our interpretation make sense in light of the fact that these authorities collected taxes? Again, doesn't that seem to suggest that these are Roman authorities?

First, let's consider Paul's mention of the "sword" "...for he does not bear the sword in vain." Did Synagogue authorities have swords?

As Nanos points out, the word for sword (μάχαιραν) is a "knife." It's the same word used in the Septuagint—the Greek translation of the Old Testament—for the knife used in circumcision (Joshua 5:2) and in the offering of Isaac (Genesis 22:6, 10) and for a "small sword" or "dagger" (Judges 3:16). The word is also often used symbolically and metaphorically in various ways (Proverbs 5:4; 12:18; 24:22; 25:18; 30:14; Isaiah 49:2). Paul and the author of Hebrews use it as a metaphor for the word of God (Ephesians 6:17; Hebrews 4:12).

Many scholars understand the phrase "bear the sword" in Romans 13:4 as a metaphor, meaning the authority to punish wrongdoers. Even scholars who hold to the majority view that Paul refers to secular

Roman authorities in Romans 13 widely recognize that Paul is speaking more about judicial authority generally, not necessarily people who carry literal swords.

For instance, Thomas Schreiner writes:

The reference instead is to the broader judicial function of the state, particularly its right to deprive of life those who had committed crimes worthy of death, though fines, arrest, imprisonment, other corporal punishment, and exile are also included.

-Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018)

Douglas Moo writes:

Scholars have argued about the exact background and significance of the phrase “bear the sword,” but none of the specific connotations suggested seems to be well established. Probably, then, Paul uses the phrase to refer generally to the right of the government to punish those who violate its laws.

-Douglas Moo, *Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1996), p. 801-802

Michael Vanlaningham writes:

Bear the sword may mean “to practice capital punishment,” or it may mean nothing more than “to punish criminals.”

-Michael Rydelnik and Michael Vanlaningham, *Romans* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2014)

John Yoder’s comments are particularly interesting:

The sword (*machaira*) is the symbol of judicial authority [...] Like the pistol worn by a traffic policeman or the sword worn by a Swiss citizen-officer, it was more a symbol of authority than a weapon.

-John H. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1994), p. 203

If we take “bear the sword” metaphorically as having the authority to punish, we can see how this could apply to synagogue authorities. The Torah granted the judges of Israel authority to exact punishment for certain offenses. The spirit of these laws appears to have been reinterpreted to some extent in the context of the synagogue. For instance, in the rabbinic literature, some leadership offices are described as having the responsibility for discipline (m.Makkot 3ff). Also, in the New Testament, congregational leaders can excommunicate unrepentant sinners as a form of discipline (Matthew 18:15-20; 1 Corinthians 5:5, 9-13).

Thus, the phrase “bear the sword” does not demand that these be secular authorities. If the phrase is a metaphor for having the authority to punish or discipline, it’s not unreasonable to think that Paul refers to religious authorities belonging to the synagogue court.

Nanos also suggests that “bear the sword” could be understood metaphorically as the authority to interpret the Scriptures. As we mentioned earlier, Scripture does use the word “sword” metaphorically for the word of God elsewhere (Ephesians 6:17; Hebrews 4:12). Nanos writes:

If Paul used “sword” figuratively here for the “word of God” it would neatly fit my proposed understanding of the context of Paul’s remarks in this paraenesis. The “authorities” of the synagogues were the interpreters of the Torah (God’s word to Israel, the Law), and they would unquestionably have been responsible for the application of the Law to the synagogue community, including Christian gentiles seeking association with the synagogue as “righteous gentiles.”

-Mark Nanos, *The Mystery of Romans* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), p. 312

That the synagogue leaders interpreted the Torah for the community may fit with the author of Hebrews’ instructions to obey and submit to one’s community leaders (Hebrews 13:17). In Hebrews, these leaders are “those who spoke to you the word of God” (Hebrews 13:7). For the readers of the letter to the Hebrews, their submission to their community leaders certainly included adhering to the leaders’ instructions and teachings about the word of God.

Now, there is an important caveat to be made on this point. The author of Hebrews doesn’t mean that we should have unquestioning loyalty to our community leaders. Rather, we should submit to their instructions and rules as a general principle. To give an analogy, in Colossians 3:20, Paul commands children to obey their parents “in everything.” But what if your parents tell you to murder an innocent person? Should you obey them? Obviously not. Paul’s point was that children are to obey their parents as a general principle. The instructions to obey our community leaders can be understood similarly.

If Paul means “bear the sword” in the sense that the authorities were the interpreters of the Torah for the community, a similar disclaimer could be made. Paul doesn’t advocate for blind obedience to their every teaching or rule. But he does appear to say that his readers should follow the rules of behavior established by the synagogue authorities *as a general principle*, just as long as their teachings don’t go against clear biblical teachings. Remember, Paul’s readers in Romans had limited local options for learning and fellowship, and most of them were recently converted Gentiles. It was in everyone’s best interest for them to keep the peace within their community, even if that meant obeying what they might have considered imperfect rules.

This may give us some additional context for the following chapter of Romans where Paul speaks at length about how believers ought to be willing to give up certain liberties for the sake of not causing their brother to stumble. The synagogue authorities may have had rulings prohibiting certain clean meats, which might be another reason Paul advises his readers to abstain from such meats even though they would have been permitted according to the Bible (Romans 14:13-23).

Now, some might say that a figurative interpretation of “sword” seems forced. But consider Paul’s figurative use of the image of armor several verses later:

Romans 13:12

The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.

It’s no question that Paul intends “armor” to be understood metaphorically as arming oneself with the “armor of God” (Ephesians 6:10-20) to defend against the wickedness of the world (Romans 13:13-14). Since Paul uses “armor” in a metaphorical way in verse 12, it’s not unreasonable to think he uses “sword” metaphorically in verse 4.

So, there are two possibilities: 1) Paul could be referring to the sword figuratively as a symbol of disciplinary authority. 2) Paul could mean “bear the sword” as a metaphor for the synagogue leaders’ authority to interpret the Torah and establish rules of behavior for the community. Both of these options could work and explain why Paul says that these authorities function in the role of approving what is good and carrying out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer (Romans 13:3-4). In the synagogue context, the authorities have the responsibility to care for and protect the community.

But what about Paul’s mention of taxes? Romans 13:6 says that there are ministers of God who attend to the collection of taxes. Again, the Greek word translated “ministers” (λειτουργοὶ) in Romans 13:6 draws from the priestly functions. There were secular government officials who would have been concerned with collecting taxes, but it seems unlikely that Paul would refer to them as “ministers of God.” An alternative suggestion, which makes better sense of the language, is that these were officials devoted to collecting *the Temple tax*. As Nanos explains:

[T]he function of the “servants of God” within the Jewish community was to devote themselves to the collection and safe delivery of the Temple tax to Jerusalem. This “privilege” for the synagogues of the Diaspora was very dear to the life of the Jewish community and the source of tension in the larger gentile communities in which they dwelt [...] If the newly Christian gentiles in Rome were expected to pay this Temple tax as “righteous gentiles” when attending synagogue, and if they were hesitant to see this as an obligation incumbent upon them in the practice of their new faith since they were not actually Jews and did not enjoy the full privileges of Jews (and were even suffering the rejection of the legitimacy of their claims), then we can make sense of the need for Paul’s instruction [...] Interestingly, in Matthew 17:24 we have the term linked directly to the payment of obligatory taxes (whether Roman poll taxes or Jewish Temple taxes), and Jesus, though not without some criticism of the obligation (apparently in concert with contemporary Qumran and Galilean positions that questioned the Pharisaic interpretation of the responsibility to pay the Temple tax annually), subordinated himself to those having the authority to collect the tax so that he would “not give them offense.” This is certainly the same sense that we have traced in Paul’s concerns throughout Romans 12-15.

-Mark Nanos, *The Mystery of Romans* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), p. 308-309

So, the “ministers of God” responsible for collecting taxes could reasonably be understood as synagogue officials charged with collecting and delivering the Temple tax to Jerusalem. This would make sense of the Greek term used for “ministers,” which is connected to the priestly service. What’s interesting is that we have primary evidence from this time period that describes just such an office. Philo, a first century Jewish philosopher, wrote about “sacred ambassadors” who collected the Temple tax and other tithes from Diaspora communities and brought it all to Jerusalem (Philo, *Gaius* 155-157; *Special Laws* 1.76-78).

Paul instructs his Gentile readers to submit to these rulers concerning the Temple tax, even if they didn’t feel like they were obligated to pay it. Doing so demonstrated their solidarity with the Jewish people and promoted harmony within the community.

Practical Application

If our interpretation is correct, what are the implications? And what principles might this passage teach us today?

First, since this is often the central passage used to say that believers are obligated to submit to secular government, there are implications concerning that discussion. How we ought to live under the governance of secular authorities perhaps might need to be reevaluated if we can no longer appeal to this passage for specific guidance in that regard.

A second implication of this interpretation is that it further supports the case that the earliest “Christians” were regarded as a sect of Judaism in the first century, not a separate religion. The followers of Yeshua in Rome, including Gentile believers, would have functioned as members of the broader Jewish community, participating in the synagogue service and observing Torah instructions like the Sabbath, festivals, and dietary laws.

As far as principles to be applied for today, there are several things we can say. First, if we attend a local fellowship, this passage might inform how we interact with the leadership there. We ought to recognize leadership’s responsibility to care for and protect the community and even to establish “rules of behavior” governing congregational services. One principle would be to respect their leadership role and abide by their rules when associating with their congregation, even if we might disagree with some of their interpretations or rules. For instance, to give a specific example, they might observe the festivals according to a calendar you personally disagree with. But rather than causing issues, you could choose, instead, to acknowledge their leadership role and fellowship with them on the dates they determine, in addition to observing the dates you think are correct on your own.

For more on this, see our teaching [Calendar Chaos: What to do?](#)

Another principle might be to be mindful of our witness to the Jewish people. That appears to be Paul’s aim in the section of Romans we covered. What might we do to inspire the Jewish people to come to salvation through Messiah? Are we putting up unnecessary stumbling blocks? Are we acting arrogant toward them? Or are we revealing to them, through our humility and love, their Jewish Messiah? These are things we should think about. And as more and more Gentile believers come to realize that Yeshua himself was Jewish, and that he did not do away with the Torah, and they start walking as Yeshua walked, maybe more Jewish people will recognize Yeshua for who he is.

In conclusion, we presented our interpretation of Romans 13:1-7, which we believe concerns religious authority—namely, synagogue authority. This interpretation, we think, makes the most sense of the overall context of Paul’s letter and the specific language he uses. While there are a couple of difficulties with this interpretation, they are to be resolved with a careful reading of the text in its historical context. This passage encourages us to respect congregational leadership, to live peaceably with those with whom we have disagreements, and to be mindful of our witness, particularly to the Jewish people.

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching.

Remember, continue to test everything.

Shalom!

For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

EMAIL: Info@119ministries.com

FACEBOOK: www.facebook.com/119Ministries

WEBSITE: www.TestEverything.net & www.ExaminaloTodo.net

TWITTER: www.twitter.com/119Ministries#