

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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Ordering-Under Authorities

By Dan Trygg

“He Himself gives everyone life and breath and all things.²⁶ From one He has made every nation of people to live upon all the face of the earth, designating their appointed times and the boundaries of where they live,²⁷ to seek God, if consequently indeed they might reach out and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us...”

Acts 17:25-27

“Let every person order-themselves-under authorities having-[power]-over, for there is no authority except under God, and the-ones-existing are having-been-arranged under God.² So that the one opposing the authority stands-over-against God's arranged-distribution, and the ones having-stood-themselves-over-against will receive judgment to themselves.³ For the ones ruling are not a fear to the good conduct, but to the evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do the good and you will have praise out from it.⁴ For a servant of God it is to you for good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, because it does not carry the sword in vain. For it is God's servant, an avenger unto wrath to the one practicing evil.⁵ Therefore, to be ordered-under is necessary, not only because of the wrath, but also on account of the inner-awareness.⁶ And for this reason you pay taxes, since the authorities are God's public servants, being-devoted to these tasks.⁷ Pay your obligations to everyone: taxes to those you owe taxes, tolls to those you owe tolls, respect to those you owe respect, and honor to those you owe honor.”

Romans 13:1-7

This passage in Romans 13 has been misunderstood, misapplied, and misappropriated by many through the centuries. It has been used to justify teachings like “manifest destiny” and “the divine right of kings”, providing so-called “justification” for horrific acts of people in power against others. Again, it is so important to see that **this passage is in the context of living out our radically-transformed life.** It is not a separate teaching ABOUT the rights of those in power, ...rather, **it is about how WE can successfully live out a dramatically different life in the midst of an evil, abusive world.** If you remember that the verse and chapter divisions were not in Paul's original letter, but were added centuries later, it helps to approach this not as a NEW thought, but as a CONTINUATION of what Paul was saying in the end of chapter 12. What was he saying? “Bless those who persecute you...” (vs. 14), “...don't return evil for evil, but be thinking about what is good in the sight of all people” (vs. 17), “...as far as depends on you, live at peace with everyone” (vs. 18), “...don't avenge yourselves...” (vs. 19), “...don't be overcome by evil, rather overcome evil with good...” (vs. 21). When you see THIS as the flow of thought leading to chapter 13, this helps us to see what Paul is saying here in a more accurate light.

Who was it that was persecuting them, if not the “authorities”? Who was treating them unjustly? Why was it so important to try to live at peace with everyone? Why was it important to consider what was honorable in the sight of all people? Why was it important not take vengeance into their own hands? In what other context could the words, “do not be conquered by evil, but conquer evil with good” be more radically and strategically relevant. **You see, governments at this time were not democracies, they were mostly totalitarian monarchies. The Roman Empire was brutal, violent and intolerant of anything it perceived as a threat to maintaining order or power.** Whether at the top level, where the Emperor himself could be high-handed, abusive and would quickly put down any voice of sedition, ...or whether on the provincial, or local level, governors, magistrates, and civic officials often were given to tactics that we would be horrified at today (although, really, things have not changed much, in many parts of the world).

Corruption and the abuse of power was everywhere. If you had the fortune to be a Roman citizen at that time, you had some rights, but that was a rare privilege. Over 60% of the populace were slaves. Life was cheap, ...very expendable in those brutal times. Just let your mind review the brutality of Jesus' death, ...or Pilate's slaying of pilgrims in the temple (Lk. 13:1), ...or the virtual *carte blanche* authority of Saul of Tarsus as he went into houses to arrest believers, tortured them, and put them to death, ...or the many abuses he, as the apostle Paul, later endured at the hands of civil authorities, ...of kings throwing people at a whim into a fiery furnace, of rulers who cut the thumbs and great toes off those they conquered and consigned them to live as scavengers under his table, of conquerors who gouged out the eyes of those they captured, of people being enslaved for minor offenses, and condemned to be galley rowers, or to work to death in the salt mines. Roman soldiers could force anyone to carry their gear for a mile. They forced Simon of Cyrene to carry Jesus' cross. **These were brutal times, and the authorities Paul is writing about here were often neither just nor nice. They ruled by force, fear and violent domination.**

Paul's counsel here is practical counsel for *survival* under such conditions, it was also meant to *secure the good will and approval* of those in authority, so that the Christians would give no undue cause to become a target.

The main message of the Bible in this regard is that **God oversees and designates periods of time when civilizations rise, and the area in which they are permitted to inhabit** (Dan. 2:21; 4:17), ...and **He judges them** for their sins and ungodly behavior. *He* is in charge, not *them*. Does that mean He approves of them, or what they do? No.

In fact, they will have to answer for their behavior. What we know from Acts 17 is that **God's purpose is that people would seek Him and come to know Him. That is what He is after.** In the OT, God told Abram that He was going to give him the land of Canaan, but it would not happen for four generations, because "the cup of the Amorite was not yet full" (Gen. 15:16). They would wander as nomads "in a land that was not theirs" 400 years. During that time they would be enslaved, and oppressed, but in the end God would judge the nation they serve, and they will come out with many possessions. Did God *want* them to be enslaved or oppressed? No. In Lamentations 3, Jeremiah wrote, "He does not afflict from His heart, or bring grief upon people. To crush prisoners under his feet, or deprive a person of justice, or defraud a person in his lawsuit, of these things the Lord does not approve" (vss. 33-36). **God permits or allows things that He does not approve of. He gives us freedom to make choices, even choices He does not desire, but then He will eventually hold us accountable for those choices.** This is true for us as individuals, and also on the level of nations. God will use unscrupulous, even evil, people to discipline nations. This is the issue that the prophet Habakkuk had to wrestle with. **God will address every injustice, and those who are in power are NOT above God's law.** While God may allow certain governments to come to power, He is NOT approving the actions of unjust leaders or colonizers.

So, what is Paul's teaching to the Christians at Rome on this subject?

(1.) "Let every person order-themselves-under authorities above them." Many versions use the words "submit" or "subject". These terms reflect almost a mindless obedience, and both terms originate from backgrounds of forced submission. **The word Paul uses here** (the same word used for our relations to one another in the Body of Christ, and of the church toward Christ – Eph. 5:21,24) **is not mindless submission.** Rather it is *voluntary cooperation*. Literally, it would be translated as "arrange-yourself-under". It is important to see that your will in this word picture remains under your voluntary control. You *choose* to "order-yourself-under authorities that are above you." You *choose* to co-operate. Why would you choose to co-operate with the authorities, especially if they are unjust, or imperfect? **(2.) these are the authorities that God has put into place at this time.** To stand against *them* is to resist what God has established, ...and to resist is to bring judgment upon oneself. **(3.) If you do not want to have to fear of authorities, do what is good, and typically the authority will commend you.** (These are meant as *general* statements, not *absolutes*. Paul had experienced corrupt and unjust authorities enough to know this was not always the case.) **(4.) The authority is a servant of God, toward good, ...whether it understands or acknowledges that, or not.** **(5.) It is a servant of God to avenge evil.** It will use *force* to police evil, even up to *death*, ...so be afraid, if you are doing evil. Based upon these principles or truths, Paul says: Consequently, it is necessary to cooperate, ...both on account of wrath (the mental-bent to set right what is wrong, unjust, or invasive) and on account of your inner awareness. **If you understand that the function of authorities is to confront evil and commend what is good, you will want to support that.** On account of this, **(6.) Paul instructs us to pay taxes, because authorities are public-servants continually-attending to these things.** He says, "Pay to everyone the things owed to them: taxes/tribute, customs, fear/respect, and honor."

Again, it is important to see that this was *not* the typical mind-set of the average person in first century Rome. Most people were *resentful* of abusive government. They certainly did not have a positive attitude toward it. To see authorities as servants of God, to confront and control evil and to reward and commend what is good, would have been a mind-blowing concept. Many people tried to avoid paying taxes, or tolls, and had little respect for those in authority. **Christians practicing Paul's counsel would have stood out as a positive, helpful influence to those in authority above them.** In 1 Timothy 2:1,2, Paul also advocated *praying for kings and people in authority "in order that we might lead a tranquil and quiet life in all good-devotion and dignity."* Note the purpose: a life of tranquility where the believers could model lives of good-devotion to God. It goes on: "...this is good and acceptable to God our Savior, who wants all people everywhere to be saved and to come to a recognition of the truth." **Paul saw that effective, favorable authorities would assist the advance of the gospel by affording a disruption-free existence where their faith could be expressed in their daily lives.**

Much of what Paul teaches in Romans 13 is also mirrored by Peter's teaching in his first letter. He also uses the same word for voluntary cooperation; mentions the function of governors as sent by God for the punishment of evil-doers and to praise the ones doing what is good. Note what Peter has to say: "It is the will of God that by doing-good you might silence the ignorance of foolish men" (I Peter 2:15). Again, **living a radically transformed life will silence those who would speak evil about those who follow Jesus.**

There are times when, out of conscience, we must choose to NOT cooperate with authorities, or comply with their demands. Then, we must freely choose to not "order ourselves under" the authorities, and respectfully stand for what we see as our duty toward God. Jesus, the apostles, Paul himself and many others have chosen to conscientiously object out of obedience, or in a stand for truth. **Often this stand on principle becomes our witness.**