

Christianity in Practice: Part 2

In the last lesson, we spent much time studying Paul's instructions to the Christians in Rome, and explored many of the characteristics that he set forth to describe what a Christian looks like. Much of what Paul wrote would be contrary to our natural inclinations, and therefore must be learned behavior. The characteristics we saw emphasized the changes that a Christian is supposed to undergo. As Christians, we will look completely different than the world around us!

The Christian's Responsibility to the Government

The end of Romans chapter 12 emphasized the need for the Christian to refrain from exercising vengeance on his enemies. Paul completed that section by instructing Christians to treat their enemies kindly, instead of turning against them in violence or retribution. Paul reminded the Christian that vengeance was not within his rights to exact, but rather was to be left to the Lord.

As we enter into chapter 13 of Romans, Paul shows Christian part of the way in which God is in control, and provides justice and vengeance for His people. Paul said that God had instituted governing authorities to provide for this task. Consider how he began:

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 (Romans 13:1).

Paul made it clear that God intends for His people to submit themselves to the governing authorities. He instituted these governing bodies, and they could not exist without His granting of the authority to them. Submission continues to be a theme of Paul's instruction throughout this section of describing the Christian. This command to submit to government would not be an easy one! Remember that Paul was writing to those under the rule of the Roman government that would shortly (if it had not started already) be bringing serious persecution upon Christians. Yet, his instructions to these brethren was that they were submit to the governing authorities!

Paul describes in this context the reason that God instituted earthly governments. They have certain God-given responsibilities. They are designated as the entity on earth that is supposed to bring forth the vengeance of God on evil doers, and protect those who are righteous. Paul said that if you do not want to fear these authorities, then do what is good. However, if you do evil you need to know that these governmental agencies do not "bear the sword in vain." He has a right to bring judgment upon those who do evil.

When the government is fulfilling its responsibility it is easy for the Christian to submit. However, what happens when the government is derelict in its duties? What if it is not taking care of the good? Nothing changes. Paul's instruction is for the Christian to submit to the governing authorities! This is an attitude that was seen in Jesus Himself. In Matthew 22, Jesus gave instructions to Jews, who did not like the government they lived under, to pay their taxes anyway (Matthew 22:15-22). The Roman government was certainly not a system that was ideal for the Jews! Yet, Jesus told them that they were to submit. Perhaps the most pointed example of this principle came when Jesus stood before Pilate. He there acknowledged that even the government that was about to be instrumental in crucifying the Messiah was given authority by God:

Then Pilate said to Him, "Are You not speaking to me? Do You not know that I have power to crucify You, and power to release You?" Jesus answered, "You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from above. Therefore the one who delivered Me to you has the greater sin" (John 19:10–11).

It is hard for us to conceive that the very government that would kill His Son was instituted by God. No government can come to power without God allowing it to happen. We may not understand why God has allowed a particular government to come to power, but we must be willing to submit to His authority in the matter. On the whole, God has intended government to serve at for the good of His people. In fact, Paul makes it clear that the one who "resists the authority resists the ordinance of God..." This rebellion would bring judgment on themselves! This instruction leaves no room for the Christian to rebel against his government!

We do need to understand Paul's instructions in comparison to the whole of the New Testament scriptures. There are occasions where the Christian cannot submit to the government, but they are very rare. We cannot choose to just ignore the government because we don't like something they are saying or doing. We cannot choose to disrespect, or disobey the government just because they are doing something that is contrary to God's word. The only examples of disregarding the instructions of the government are when that government require action that is directly contrary to God's instructions. We can see this principle illustrated for us in Acts 5:22-32. There, the apostles had been arrested, imprisoned, and threatened. Peter, however, made it clear that they were not going to follow the instructions given to them because they directly violated the instructions that came from God. There may arise circumstances that force us to reject the instructions of the government, and therefore fail to submit in that particular circumstance. In such a case, one has to submit to God first, and follow His instruction.

Peter confirms the instructions of Paul in this passage:

Therefore submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake, whether to the king as supreme, or to governors, as to those who are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and for the praise of those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men—as free, yet not using liberty as a cloak for vice, but as bondservants of God. Honor all people. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king (1 Peter 2:13–17).

In most circumstances, doing good will bring a favorable response from the governing authorities. Of course, that may not always be the case. The very audience that both Paul and Peter were addressing were going to soon face tribulations because they were Christians; because they were doing good! Even when the government does not act as it should, the Christian's responsibility does not change. He is to submit to the government, and do all that he can to live a peaceable life (Romans 12:18." When Paul wrote to Timothy, he told him to pray for rulers so that this peaceable life would be possible:

Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Timothy 2:1–4).

As a part of this submission, Paul made it clear that the Christian is supposed to pay his taxes. He has a responsibility, even when the government is using those taxes to do something that they do not like, to pay that which is owed. It is, after all, through those taxes that they are also capable of doing the good that God intends for them to do. Paul ended this section by telling the Christian to fulfill their obligations to all within the government:

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).

Notice, that Paul didn't say we are to do these things if and when we agree with all that the governing bodies are doing. He didn't say that we are to show honor when rulers are doing exactly what God has instructed. He said that we are to pay our taxes, and show fear and honor to those who are in these positions to rule over us. As we have pointed out, that does not mean we obey instructions that are contrary to the will of God, but it does mean that we have a responsibility to show honor to those who rule over us. This instruction was written to those who would serve under an oppressive Roman Empire. And, this instruction would be true for every person who lives, no matter what form of government they might find themselves under! Because of the blessings we enjoy under the governmental system found here in the United States of America, we sometimes think the Bible (and especially passages such as this one) were written to us, and only to us! But, God's word teaches the same thing to Christians living under oppressive regimes today as it did to those living under the Roman rule. Submit to government, pay your taxes, and give fear and honor to those who are in positions of authority.

The Christian's Responsibility to All Men

In verse 8 of Romans 13, Paul transitioned from a focus on our responsibility to government to our responsibility to all men. He started with the idea that we are to "Owe no one anything..." The idea here is not to insist that the Christian can never incur a debt, but rather that when the debt is due, you pay it. You do not fail to pay the things that you do owe. The only "debt" that was permitted to run over was love. Why was it permitted to "owe love"? Because "he who loves another has fulfilled the law."

Paul here masterfully ties together the ideas of love and law. He shows how the commands that God had given to His people even under the Old Testament covenant were given for "love." If His people would follow the instructions that they were given, they would be expressing love to their brethren. But, the fulfillment of this love went beyond just brethren. This instruction expanded the idea to all men. When one restrained himself from adultery, or murder, or stealing, or bearing false witness, or coveting, they were loving their fellow man. In fact, Paul said that those who followed all of the commands were fulfilling the one command: you shall love your neighbor as yourself." Remember, Jesus Himself said that this was the second greatest command, only falling behind the command to love the Lord:

Then one of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, and saying, "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?" Jesus said to him, " 'You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 22:35-40).

Jesus also showed us what He means by a "neighbor." In Luke 10:25-37, Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan to answer the question: Who is my neighbor? There, Jesus showed that there is a responsibility that falls on each of us to help others when we have opportunity. We are not supposed to limit the field of "neighbors" so that we can limit our personal responsibility, but rather watch for opportunities to be neighbors to any that can use our help. It is easy to be "neighbors" to people who never want or need anything from us; people who stay out our way and we out of theirs. But, it becomes much more difficult to be the kind of neighbor that Jesus describes in Luke 10. That type of neighbor has a lot of responsibility laid upon him! This type of neighbor loves others like he loves himself. Just as he would want himself cared for, he cares for others. This can be

a very difficult application! When we see someone who needs assistance, perhaps we should think about how we would want others to respond if they saw us in the same predicament. Or how we would want someone else to respond if they saw our wife, or our children in a similar predicament. We can then see far more clearly how we should respond!

Paul said that “Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.” When we truly love people, we will not be able to do anything that harms them. Note that Paul is not addressing hurting someone’s feelings with the gospel message here. He is addressing doing things that actually harm them. When we love our fellow man, we will treat them exactly like we want to be treated. If we are Christians, that will be expressed by trying to teach the gospel to them. That is, after all, what we would want them to do for us, is it not?

Even though Paul used the examples of the Old Testament covenant (the 10 commandments) to illustrate his point, the same is most certainly true under the New Testament covenant. Of course, the examples of commands that he used are repeated, and thus once again in effect, in the New Covenant. But, he never intended that we would take this as an exhaustive list. He ended his list with, “and if there is any other commandment...” All of the instructions of God are for our good, and following them reflects our love for Him and for our fellow man!

Urgency of Christianity

In the last section of Romans 13, Paul wrote about the urgency of obedience before the Lord. The time had come for them to “awake out of sleep.” This idea is not supposed to convey the image of physical sleep, but rather the need to awaken spiritually. Paul used a similar image when writing to the Thessalonian brethren:

For you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night. For when they say, “Peace and safety!” then sudden destruction comes upon them, as labor pains upon a pregnant woman. And they shall not escape. But you, brethren, are not in darkness, so that this Day should overtake you as a thief. You are all sons of light and sons of the day. We are not of the night nor of darkness. Therefore let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk are drunk at night. But let us who are of the day be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet the hope of salvation. For God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, that whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with Him. Therefore comfort each other and edify one another, just as you also are doing (1 Thessalonians 5:2–11).

The image of being awake, and watching shows one to always be ready. Jesus told many parables about watching and waiting, always being alert and ready for what was to come. There is no time to stay asleep, ignoring the times.

Paul continued to say that “for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed.” This phrase emphasizes the urgency we should feel about our responsibilities here. The longer we live, and the more we learn about God and Christ, the more urgent we should feel. We get closer and closer to our eternal salvation each day!

This realization should spur in us an understanding that we need to make some significant changes. We are going to leave behind the things of darkness, and move on into the light. God has provided for us the armor we need (see vs. 12, cf Ephesians 6:10-20). We can fight the good fight with all that He has prepared for us! We need to stop walking in darkness, and start walking in the light. Walking in the light will force us to put off the works of darkness (revelry, drunkenness, lewdness, lust, strife and envy). Instead, Paul said that we are to, “Put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts.” This is very similar to the language that Paul used when

writing to the Galatian brethren:

We who are Jews by nature, and not sinners of the Gentiles, knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified. "But if, while we seek to be justified by Christ, we ourselves also are found sinners, is Christ therefore a minister of sin? Certainly not! For if I build again those things which I destroyed, I make myself a transgressor. For I through the law died to the law that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me. I do not set aside the grace of God; for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died in vain" (Galatians 2:15–21).

Notice, in these passages, Paul shows that he has given up himself so that he can live for Christ. In Romans 13, he said that we must "put on the Lord Jesus Christ.." This is a phrase that is quite similar to Paul's instructions to the Galatians:

For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ (Galatians 3:27).

Through putting Christ on in baptism, we change the way that we walk. Instead of walking in darkness, in sinfulness and worldliness, we walk in the light. Paul said that in this walk we are to "make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its lusts." This indicates the complete change that is to take place. We don't put most of the worldliness out of our lives. We "make no provision for the flesh..." This should once again remind us of Paul's teaching in Romans 6, where he made it clear that we are to put the old man of sin to death, and raise up a new man. We are to become slaves of righteousness!

John also utilizes a similar idea of light versus darkness in his writing. In 1 John 1:5-2:2, John made it clear that the Christian has a responsibility to "walk in the light." This idea was established on the fact that "God is light and in Him is no darkness at all." Why would one want to continue to walk in darkness when he realized that there was no darkness in God? One who is striving to become as much like God as he can be would never want to "walk" were God was not.

John's imagery was taken straight from Jesus' own teaching. When Jesus was told of Lazarus' sickness, He determined to go to him, but the disciples were concerned for His safety. When they voiced their concerns, Jesus responded:

Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. But if one walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him" (John 11:9–10).

We can clearly see the foundation of the writings of the inspired writers' words in Jesus' teaching! This contrast of light and dark illustrates the difference between one walking in worldliness and walking in the Lord.

This concept can also be found in the prophecies of Isaiah. In chapter 2, Isaiah prophesied about the coming of the new kingdom, and he said that they would need to "walk in the light of the Lord" (see Isaiah 2:1-5). This idea resurfaces time and again for the people of God! From all of these passages, we learn that there is a need for God's people to "walk in the light." We are to avoid the spiritual darkness, realizing the consequences of continuing in it. "Let us walk properly in the daytime..." (Romans 13:13).

Questions...

1. What responsibility does the Christian owe to governing authorities? How is this responsibility affected by our approval or disapproval of those authorities?
2. What role has God relegated to the governing authorities? Why has He done this? Consider Romans 12:19-21.
3. What two reasons did Paul give for Christians being in subjection to the government? What does this mean?
4. Should Christians pay taxes even when they disagree with the way that the money collected will be spent? Why or why not?
5. Discuss Paul's use of contrast between wake and sleep, light and dark.
6. What must one do in order to ensure that they "make no provision for the flesh..."?