

## Prayer

Lord God, we praise You for the love You have shown to us as our heavenly Father. May we learn from Your example how best to love and care for those who are closest to us, especially when it is hard. May we also learn how to show love to those who are not close to us, but whom we meet in the course of everyday life. Everyone we meet is someone for whom You have died, so let us seek to do what is right for everyone we meet and in whatever circumstances we meet them. We praise You, heavenly Father: AMEN

## Prayer Suggestions

### Prayer ideas

*Give thanks to God for the money you possess. Ask the Lord about how you should use the resources at your disposal, especially your money, however much you have*

### On-going prayers

- **Pray for Christian who live under oppression:** *Pray for Christians who are oppressed by the secular world, in some places more acutely than in others*
- *Praise God for His deliverance, and the protection that he gives you throughout your life*
- *Continue to pray for Libya especially for peoples who have been oppressed and now long for the freedoms we now enjoy elsewhere in the world*

## Meditation

In the midst of our troubles; You are with us, O Lord:  
You are always at hand is to bless and to love.

When we are tempted to sin but turn back to You,  
Your love forgives us and Your mercy covers us.

When we are troubled by evils or upset by failure,  
Your power protects us and Your energy empowers us.

When we become exhausted and lose our way,  
Your strength upholds us and Your vision guides us.

When we give up hope and need to be challenged,  
Your future inspires us and Your mission calls us.

May we never reject the treasure of Your presence,  
Or take the pleasures of life instead of Your glory!

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## Bible passage - Romans 13:1-7

<sup>1</sup> Everyone should accept the rule of the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which comes from God, and those that exist have put been in place by God. <sup>2</sup> So people who resist the government resist what God has ordered, and those who resist will bring judgement on themselves.

<sup>3</sup> For magistrates are no threat to those who do good work, but only those who do evil. Do you want to have no fear of government? Then do what is right, and you will receive its praise; <sup>4</sup> for it is God's servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong, be fearful, for it does not wield the power of the sword without good reason. It is God's servant in order to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.

<sup>5</sup> This is why we must live under subjection, not simply because of the fear of punishment, but because of conscience. <sup>6</sup> You pay taxes for the same reason, for the authorities are God's

servants, busy with doing just this. <sup>7</sup> Pay to each one their due; taxes to whom they are due, revenues to whom they are due, and due respect to whom it is due.

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## Bible Study

### Review

In this passage, Paul's advice about Christian behaviour is not often understood or appreciated! He says that it is the Christian's duty to accept the authority of the state and pay taxes, because the source of all authority is God (13:1). Now for any who have a reasonably good life and feel that their interests are protected, this advice sounds sensible and sound. Those whose lives are blighted by dictatorship or other forms of political domination may naturally feel differently, for there are plenty of passages of Scripture that suggest opposition to corrupt or tyrannical governments. The prophets for example, berate godlessness in the nations of the world (see Isaiah 16ff.). We must therefore approach this Scripture with care.

Firstly, we must understand the background against which Paul wrote. It was certainly in the interests of Christians to 'keep their heads down' and not raise the suspicions of the vast Roman Empire. Jesus had been crucified for being a threat to the state, and apparently claiming rights over Caesar (remember the placard stating, '*the King of the Jews*' – Matt 27:37). So if Christians had acted in too radical a manner, Roman officials would have become suspicious about their allegiance to the Empire and the Emperor, and their lives would have been endangered. Jesus died for the salvation of all humanity, but it was not the duty of early Christians to die in like manner; their job was to survive and bring the Gospel to the rest of the world.

Most local Roman authorities regarded Christians as a sect of the Jews, and considered them safe. However, the preaching of the Gospel sometimes raised riots, and the authorities were not happy about this. Certainly, Paul had to escape prosecution after the riots in Ephesus (Acts 19:28f.), and in AD49, riots in Rome were blamed on Jews, but both Jews and Christians were thrown out of the city because officials did not know the difference between the two (see Acts 18:2). Paul was writing to Christians in Rome, and they would have felt very insecure if he had written with politically insensitivity.

Nevertheless, Paul would still not have written this unless he believed it to be an accurate reflection of God's will and purpose, and his teaching is remarkably similar to that of Jesus. He would have been aware of the amazing story of what happened when the Pharisees tried to trick Jesus with a question about taxes (Matthew 22:16-22). Taking hold of a coin and showing the side with the head of Caesar, Jesus responded with the famous words '*give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's*'. Here, Jesus accepts the authority of the Roman Empire, especially in paying taxes, given that this does not infringe upon freedom to believe in God. Paul says virtually the same.

For the last two thousand years, most Christians have lived and worked within the national or state authorities where they have lived. They have certainly advocated the Kingdom of God in a way that has prompted radical change within individuals, and they have often changed society as a consequence, but they have rarely advocated establishing the Kingdom of God by force. Moreover, when they have done so, the consequences have not been good. For example, it was not long after Christianity became the state religion (321AD) that the Roman Empire collapsed (debatably, from the fourth century onwards).

The message of Jesus echoed here by Paul suggests that there is an important difference between power granted to worldly authority for its governance and peace, and authority that is God's alone to direct the world and to save people. The duty of every Christian is surely to know the difference between the two so that each may be properly understood and respected. Certainly, the consistent teaching of Scripture asks for respect towards stable forms of government, and opposition only of those that blatantly infringe basic human liberties such as those clearly assumed in Jesus' 'Sermon on the Mount' (Matthew 5-7).

For this reason, the church has traditionally been an active supporter of stable government and has not been afraid to be political, despite the problems this creates, and it has also been a focus for opposition to tyrannical regimes. Christians generally seem willing to pay taxes for stable government but not to give money to dictators.

### **Going Deeper**

The Bible study continues with further information about the following subjects:

- Being subject to authorities
- The authority of God in the world
- The authorities and evil

## Going Deeper

The relationship of God's people to earthly states and rulers is yet more complex than this, and Paul's advice is also based upon an understanding of the Old Testament, and God's supreme authority over all things. All of this is important, as well as a closer understanding of this important text.

### ***Being subject to authorities***

Older versions of the Bible had translations of verse 1 similar to this; 'let every soul be subject to the higher powers' (King James Version). This raises two questions. What are the 'powers' and 'authorities' mentioned in this text, and are we right to equate them with the Roman Empire?. Secondly, what does it mean to be 'subject' to these authorities? It is true that the word Paul uses for 'authorities' is one that could be used for something other than the Roman civil authorities. It was also used for angelic or demonic powers and authorities (as in Ephesians 3:10 or Titus 3:1, for example), but this should not surprise us, because for Paul, all things came from God, and they could be used for good or for evil. His idea of authority was that it all came from God (see 13:1,2,4,6) and was therefore intrinsically good, unless obviously used by Satan for evil. Paul was doubtless aware of occasions when the civil authorities in his own day did things which were evil, but his underlying belief was that the rule of law, civil order and justice were essentially good for everyone. As he said in verses 3 and 4, the only people who had anything to fear from the basic need for law and order within human society would be those who were evil, or were plotting against it for their own purposes.

The second point is about the nature of our submission to the earthly authorities under which we live. The words 'subject' or 'submission' conjure up in us today something more than what is meant by the Greek word used by Paul ('*hypostassestho*'). It is much more realistic to think in terms of 'accepting the claims', or as I have translated it, 'accepting the rule' of the governing authorities. This is closer to the heart of the matter, for what Paul was wanting from Christians was a common acceptance of the civic order in which they lived, because arguments as to whether the Roman State in his own day was 'Christian' or not were distracting to the Gospel. Paul would undoubtedly say that the Roman State was not Christian, but its authority derived from God Almighty. This was his platform to preach the Gospel.

### ***The authority of God in the world***

Why would Paul give this answer? We forget that it is was a common feature of the Old Testament for God to use worldly powers and authorities to achieve His will and purpose, especially when dealing with His own recalcitrant people. An example of this is the way God used Babylon to punish His people and bring them to a place of repentance within which they would hear the prophetic words of Jeremiah calling them to rediscover God in their hearts (Jer 29 and 31:31ff) rather than in the old stone tablets of the law in the Temple. The list of ancient foreign kings and authorities used by God is extensive, including Pharaoh's (Gen 40:2f. and 2 Kings 23:39f.) and Persian Kings (2 Chron 36:22, Ezra 1:1f., Isaiah 45:1,13 Dan 6:28f.). Sometimes these authorities were used by God for good purposes, and sometimes (as in his handing over of Jerusalem to the Babylonians) for what appeared to be evil, but was in fact God's judgement upon sin, which ultimately had good consequences for those who accepted what He had done for His people (see the books of Ezra and Nehemiah).

In all this we must remember that Paul saw the world as a fallen one in which evil and sin held sway, and a world which was challenged by the Kingdom of God on earth established in people's hearts through faith in Jesus and demonstrated in the life of the Church. The Church and the Kingdom were the consequences of God's work in the world through Jesus and they pointed to a new age in which God would make all things new (see Romans 8:19f.). However, he also regarded the 'present age' in which he lived and in which we still live, as one in which the old order still persisted, established under God since the Flood (Gen 9) and subject to all manner of evil, but still showing evidence of its Creator and His ultimate control over all things. It is too easy for Christians today to read the New Testament and come to the conclusion that the world is a battlefield between good and evil, without understanding the subtleties of Scripture which make this simplistic view more of a parody than a reflection of the truth. Scripture always insists that God has ultimate authority and control over His world, and although this means that we can 'blame God for everything', that is our problem, not His; for in Christ, God is doing the work of defeating Satan and all evil, and seeking to make 'all things work together for good' (Romans 8:28).

### ***The authorities and evil***

In the light of this, it is fascinating that Paul makes one or two references in this passage to the way in which God's judgement works naturally through the authority He has given to the Roman State. In verses 4 and 5, Paul speaks of the way in which those who do 'what is wrong' bring punishment on themselves which is meted out by the Roman State. However, on the two occasions when the word 'punishment' occurs in the translation, the Greek word is '*orge*', used elsewhere in Scriptures to describe God's 'wrath'. You may remember that in the first chapter of Romans, Paul describes how 'wrath' works; once someone begins to

sin, they find themselves trapped because sin leads to more sin and eventually becomes its own punishment. In that passage, Paul emphasises that sin always has consequences, and this is the message in this passage. If anyone acts sinfully against the State, the authorities act as an agent of God's 'wrath', and the individual will find that once they have become entrapped within its clutches for punishment, it is very hard to get out! The Roman State was renowned for being extremely tough in punishment.

The very last verse of this passage gives us a hint about what the heated topic for debate was in Paul's day; it was paying taxes to the Roman State! Yet strangely, we have now come full circle, for it was Jesus' answer to a question about paying taxes which first helped us to understand something about this text!

## Application

Over the centuries, Christians have struggled to assess the rights and wrongs of placing their confidence in this or that civic authority or State. Certainly, after the time of Paul, the Roman State did become periodically hostile to Christianity, particularly during the persecutions under Trajan (100-120AD) and Diocletius (300-310 AD). Yet the Scriptural requirement placed upon us is to accept the State in which we live, with the exception that we feel compelled to stand against what the State does if it dominates people in an ungodly manner.

If you were to be a Christian living in a country which was run by a dictator, such as Zimbabwe, where one man has virtually raped his own land and people for personal power and political gain, creating such fear that people cannot mount any opposition, then the nature of the ungodliness of the State is clear. You may feel it necessary to be as law abiding as you can, but you may feel it is your Christian duty to seek to work against the government, and you should not fear contravening this passage of Scripture from Romans. If you were living in a country where the rules of law reflect another religion, then you may equally wish to be a law abiding citizen, but find yourself a victim of the State simply because of your faith. You should not feel that any punishment you have is from God or that you have acted against these principles of Scripture.

The real difficulty that many of us in the West have is this; whilst our authorities derive from Christianity, they regard themselves as 'secular', and at times they take powers which seem very close to assuming the position of God over the electorate. Whilst we may wish to be law abiding, some feel that they have a moral and Scriptural duty to stand against such things as the pursuit of war, the loss of civil liberties, or the central control of some aspects of life, because these all take away our Godly liberties. Such matters as these will always remain a matter of debate, and perhaps the true value of Romans 13 is its cautionary note which makes us stop and think before pursuing our own political interests as if they were the same as God's.

I remain of the opinion that Jesus' words from Matthew 22:21 should be put together with this passage to form the basis of good ethical guidance to Christians about how to respond to the State in which we live.

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## Discipleship

### **Questions** (for use in groups)

1. Which parts of this passage do you find difficult either to understand or to accept, and why?
2. Some have suggested that Paul's advice in Romans 13 is simply a reflection of his own confidence in the Roman Empire. Does the text bear this out?
3. What do you feel about the nature of the taxes imposed upon you and the people in your society? Are they justifiable before God? Discuss.

### **Personal comments by author**

*It is my observation that people either respond very positively to this passage or quite negatively! Some accept its value without difficulty, but others feel that the passage refers to compromise with the world, and this does not fit easily with other things written by Paul elsewhere in Scripture. The passage, however, requires each of us to act with discernment and not with a knee-jerk reaction. We must decide in the light of our own experience how to deal with the government of our own countries.*

### **Ideas for exploring discipleship**

- Read a newspaper and make a list of those things you find that demonstrate good government and bad. Use this to help you react to this passage.

- *Spend some time in prayer with this text, asking the Lord to show you what your proper response to this should be. Pray for your nation and its government, especially if you think it is corrupt.*
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## **Final Prayer**

Mysterious and Almighty God, Holy Spirit and Saviour through Jesus Christ our Lord, You are beyond my understanding and yet intimate with my spirit. You are magnificent in splendour and yet close to my feelings, dependable in my salvation yet blowing like a wind through my soul. Praise You Lord God, for I love what You do! AMEN

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