

SUMMED UP
Romans 13

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The summing of God's word is to love your neighbor as you love yourself. That sums up the commandments of the Old Testament.

There's a new trend now. Everybody wanted to move to the cities, now everyone wants to move back to the suburbs. I found an article in the *Wall Street Journal*, "So You've Bought a House in the 'Burbs. Here's How to Make Good With Your Neighbors."

There are some things your neighbors would like you to know before you move into their neighborhood. You know, moving into a neighborhood is kind of like getting married – you marry not just the girl or the guy; you become connected to the whole family.

Like your inlaws, your new neighbors will be watching you, waiting for you to mess it up. And they won't soon forget. Like the writer of the article says, "My neighbors are still giving me grief about the year we left our Christmas wreath up until March, a shame we wear like a brownish, crumbly Scarlet Letter "O" on our chest.

The ways you can alienate your community are endless. You make too much noise. You own an aggressive pet. You drive too fast down the street. You cut down trees that don't belong to you – I don't know how that can make anybody mad. You act like a total Karen – whatever that is, but there is something one can do to act like a Karen.

Failure to wave. Oh, you're walking down the street. Someone you don't know waves at you from their porch. You don't see it. Maybe you just want to keep exercising. You don't wave back. Or you wave back insufficiently.; you lack enthusiasm in your return wave. They will start walking about you before your feet hit your front door. "He's stuck up." "Is that the one from New York. I thought it must be." You see, when your neighbor waves at you, you'd better wave back like they are a beloved relative, long lost, risen from the dead, and you were glad to see them.

And then there is the holiday decor issue, isn't there? In some neighborhoods – some of you live on those streets – there is a long tradition of seeing who can have the largest electric bill during the month of December. So you can't buy a house on that street and just put a simple wreath on the door. No, you've got to light it up. And yet there are other neighborhoods where if you move in and overdo it, they will call you one of those "holiday persons." And they will be a little bit nervous that you are going to observe every single holiday, like National Oysters Rockefeller Day (January 10) or National Bicarbonate of Soda Day (December 30). Just let one full holiday pass

before you decide how much decorating you do. Play it in the middle until you figure out your neighbor. (Kris Frieswick, *WSJ* 2/18/2021)

In chapter 12, last week we saw the Apostle Paul instruct the church concerning how to relate to the world of unbelievers – those whose primary citizenship is not to the kingdom of God, but, rather, to the Roman Empire, to those whose Lord is Caesar, not the Christ.

Chapter 13 continues those instructions. Here, Paul addresses how Christians are to co-exist peacefully with government authorities and why they should do so. Scholars have argued there should be no division at Romans 12:31 (remember, chapter designations are secondary), because in chapter 13, he continues with the same topic. Paul is not off on a tangent. In fact, overarching this section, Romans 12:18 rings true, “If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.”

He is telling the church that they may be free from the Jewish law, which has been fulfilled in the Christ event, but they are not free from the civil law which calls them to respect the authorities that govern.

Paul concludes chapter 13 by calling upon us to love our neighbor and reminding us that the coming of the real King, the real Christ, is just around the corner.

Let’s divide chapter 13 into three sections.

I. Respect authority (vs. 1-7)

“Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves. For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same; for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil. Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience’ sake. For because of this you also pay taxes, for rulers are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing. Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor.”

This same writer, Paul, in his letter to the church at Philippi, states clearly, “For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ” (Philippians 3:20). Paul knows that, ultimately, our citizenship is in another kingdom, the kingdom of God, with another king, King Jesus. But in the meantime, in the here and now, we are called upon to subject ourselves to God’s governing authority, even pagan rulers.

He chooses his words carefully. He says “submit to them.” He doesn’t say “obey them.” Those are two different words. Submission is yielding to another, willingly, out of respect. Obedience can be compelled by force, whether one is inclined to obey or not. One decides to submit, which

leaves the door open for believers not to do so if they decide, in good conscience, they cannot obey a government's ungodly order.

When would one not submit to governing authority?

When the evil scheme of Adolph Hitler was on the rise in Germany, the National Socialist Union of Protestant Pastors issued the Ansbach Memorandum. The fourth thesis of the memorandum bluntly supported Adolph Hitler. I quote, "As Christians, we honor with gratitude to God every ordering of society and, thus, every authority, even in disfigurement." The history and the immeasurable atrocities of Adolph Hitler's Third Reich shows how mistaken the pastors were submitting to a führer who embodied evil.

In most cases, however, even when the authority is pagan, Christians should submit when their conscience allows. Why? He gives the reason.

All authority is from God, and God has instituted the civic authorities to govern civic affairs. Most broadly, in the biblical world view, Paul's assessment that God has placed governing powers rings true with the Jewish assessments of God guiding the rise and fall of nations and kings (Proverbs 8; Isaiah 45; Jeremiah 27; Daniel 2; Daniel 4; Daniel 5).

Now Paul himself had mixed results in dealing with the Roman Empire. Gallio, the proconsul of Achaia, dismissed the charges the Jews raised against Paul at Corinth. But that positive outcome is clearly offset by many of his other negative experiences with Roman justice. He had been beaten with rods at least three times by Roman magistrates (2 Corinthians 11; 1 Thessalonians 2; 2 Corinthians 1). In Acts 16, he recites just how unjust this punishment was when it was administered at Philippi. But Paul's positive arguments are bigger than his own results. Paul is saying God is not a God of disorder, but of peace (1 Corinthians 1:14). But you are smart enough to read between the lines. Paul has actually demoted Caesar, hasn't he? He doesn't specifically mention the emperor, thus, essentially, demoting him to the rank of any other governing authority of the day.

Secondly, these authorities belong to the undifferentiated, finite political powers that derive their existence from the supreme authority, who is God. The very fact that they are from God, established by God (even the evil among them), means that God alone is supreme. How many times in the Old Testament does God use evil kings of pagan nations to drive the history of humanity toward His own purpose? God can raise up Pharaoh, who denies God's very existence, to display God's own glory.

God desires (v. 3) order and justice in the world over anarchy and lynch mobs. Paul is urging Christians to be good neighbors and live in their communities and countries as good citizens, behaving in ways that are plainly perceived as good for others. Paul doesn't want to hinder the church with a bad reputation. Doing what is good not only heads off unwanted negative attention from the authorities, but it also opens the door for others to come to faith.

In verse 5, Paul introduces the idea of "conscience." Not only are we to submit to avoid the wrath of the government, but also because Christians ought to live with a clear conscience. A clear

conscience leads one to act honorably in all things (Hebrews 13). But introducing the idea of conscience does remind us that the possibility, therefore, does exist that one, on the other hand, might resist authorities for conscience' sake. The earthly rulers are not the final arbiters of right and wrong, good and evil. Remember when Peter and John were arrested by the Jewish authorities, the governing Sanhedrin, for preaching Jesus? "Whether it is right in the sight of God for us to listen to you rather than God, you decide, for we are unable to stop speaking about what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:19-20). Later, Peter and the apostles persist in disobeying the high priest's order to stop preaching, insisting "We must obey God rather than human authority" (Acts 5:29). They refused to be silenced, even by the Sanhedrin.

There is a time and place for civil disobedience, but make it rare and choose carefully, Paul proclaims. Paul orders them to pay their taxes (v. 7), echoing, of course, the words of Jesus in Mark 12. Perhaps we should be reminded the gospel was spread by those traveling Roman roads, paid for by taxes. Yes, the Roman roads facilitated Roman conquest and the administration of a growing empire, but they also hastened the spread of the Jesus story.

Paul closes this section by saying "Give honor to whom honor is do." Not worship, but honor.

There are several people we are told to honor in the New Testament. Honor your wives (1 Peter 3). Honor fellow believers (Romans 12), especially the less-honored members of the church body (1 Corinthians 12). Even Moses honored Pharaoh (Exodus 8).

Polycarp, a disciple of John the Apostle, tells the proconsul of Asia, "We have been taught to give honor to magistrates and authorities appointed by God, as is fitting" (*Mart.Pol.10.2*). The authorities are only owed honor, not absolute obedience. Only God is owed utmost allegiance.

Paul wants Christians in Rome to be model citizens. Attracting unfavorable attention from governing authorities would only hinder the Christian mission. And he surely knew history well enough to know that all Jewish revolts against Rome had ended in utter disaster for God's people.

Have we ever lived in a day when authority was more disrespected than now? You remember, once upon a time, when your parents taught you to respect authority, like Paul teaches the church? I mean all appropriate authorities – policeman and principals; monarchs and mayors; generals and judges; teachers and tribal chiefs. But clearly, to the demise of our culture, we live in the age of disrespect.

Just as an example, how about our school teachers? The reality is that many of our teachers ought to be receiving combat pay, the way they are treated today. "Who the blankity-blank are you?! Are you some blankity-blank sub?!"

Profane questions. Yes, gutter profanity uttered by a student after school one day, was directed toward – you got it – a public school teacher. In fact, I am absolutely unable to quote to you the things I have found documented as being said by students to teachers in an article entitled "Is Disrespect On the Rise?"

A Google survey sent by *The Shakerite* (the student news organization of a public high school in Shaker Heights, Ohio) indicated that 62 percent of school teachers have been verbally abused in the classroom. Teachers being subjected to racial and ethnic slurs, being called a swear word, being the target of vulgar language, being yelled at, and receiving threats of violence.

Should the teachers look to parents for help? In fact, some of the students said they would enlist their family members in their threats of violence against the teachers. “My uncle will find you,” a student threatens the teacher. By the way, this particular high school has 12 security guards stationed throughout the building during the day.

Sophomore Julia Schmitt-Palumbo said students act out because they don’t like authority. Sophomore Charlotte Cupp said it’s habitual for students to disrespect teachers because they don’t recognize what they are doing. “You should,” she says, and I quote, “treat your teachers how you would treat another human. If everyone treats others like a human being, we wouldn’t have these problems with hatred and disrespect.” (“Is Disrespect On The Rise?” <https://shakerite.com>)

You have to set the tone in kindergarten for how teachers are treated. Like a referee who blows his whistle calling fouls, the first few minutes sets the tone for the rest of the basketball game. Good luck, teacher; we’re with you.

Perhaps parents do play the role of setting the tone. In a Christian basketball league, much like our Upward league, Tim Goodpaster, sits all the players near center court and shares the story of Jesus with everybody in attendance. He tells them how much God loves them and literally invites them to come to Jesus. When he’s finished, he turns his attention to the game that’s about to be played and reminds all those in attendance that the referee is the authority figure and that, as such, should be shown proper respect and that disrespect will not be tolerated. The referee is not to be tarred and feathered after the game. (Rev. Jeremy Myers, “Authority issues: A little respect goes a long way,” jeremysmyers.com)

It seems like such a little thing, but it matters. Our failure to show appropriate amounts of respect for those in positions of authority, even the officials at a kids’ basketball game, sets a poor example for those who are observing us. It sends a message to our kids, doesn’t it? And, unfortunately, to our children our own attitudes and actions speak much more loudly than our words. And though we say “don’t” in private, our own actions say “do.” Maybe we are all today, like the players that Tim Goodpaster coaches, being called to come to Jesus in our own hearts. And yes, yours truly is absolutely guilty.

II. Don’t only respect authority, but love your neighbor (vs. 8-10)

“Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law. For this, ‘You shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal. You shall not covet,’ and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; love, therefore, is the fulfillment of the law.”

The title of this sermon is “Summed Up.” How do you “sum up” all the 613 Jewish laws? They are summed up in “Love your neighbor.”

The love story begins within the church – “love one another” (v. 8). And then it grows out to our neighbor. It was an hour taking a brisk walk around the neighborhood, raising the heart rate on the Apple watch, when a little preschooler running around in his front yard walked up to interrupt my exercise. With a puzzled look on his face, “Are you my neighbor?” Oh, don’t worry, the mama bear wasn’t far behind.

“I sure am,” I said. “We are neighbors.”

He might have meant something like this: Do you care about me? Are we friends? Can you come over and play? Am I going to get to know you? Can I count on you when life gets rough? Are you somebody there for me? Are you my neighbor?”

Of course, Paul’s words take us back to Luke 10. A certain lawyer stood up and tried to test Jesus. “What do I have to do to get to heaven, Rabbi?” And Jesus answers, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind. And love your neighbor as yourself. Do this and you’ll live forever.”

Trying to narrow Christ’s call to care, the man says, “Well, who is my neighbor?”

To answer, Jesus tells the story of the man going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, falling among robbers, being stripped, beaten, and left half-dead. The religious passerby, the priest, walks on the other side, pretending not to notice. Likewise the Levite, another religious authority, ignores the victim by veering around him. Eventually, the hated half-breed, perennial enemy of the Jews, the Samaritan, sees the victim, has compassion, bandages up the wounds, anoints them with medicine, and carries the wounded man to an inn for care. Jesus asks the question, “Which of these do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the robber’s hands? Go and do the same.”

Are you my neighbor?

The law really is summed up with love. If you love your neighbor, you won’t murder him. You won’t steal from him. You won’t view her as simply an object for your sexual pleasure. If you just love, you’ve fulfilled the law.

The chapter ends with a section I’ve entitled

III. Wake up (vs. 11-14)

“Do this, knowing the time, that it is already the hour for you to awaken from sleep; for now salvation is nearer to us than when we believed. The night is almost gone, and the day is near. Therefore let us lay aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave properly as in the day, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual promiscuity and sensuality, not in strife and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts.”

Can you imagine living in two time zones in one place? In Nicosia [nick oh see uh], Cyprus, Tamur and her husband, Michalis, now have to set two clocks in their home, each clock on a different time zone, an hour apart.

Tamur, a 35-year-old diving instructor who lives on the south side of the island but works on the north side, says, “My phone and all my digital appliances are set in southern time, but our TV satellite box and my car clock are set to northern time.” Now that would be a nightmare – gives a whole new meaning to “What time is it?” In Nicosia [nick oh see uh], it’s two times at the same time.

On this island in the eastern Mediterranean Sea, the Republic of Cyprus, like the rest of Europe, moves the clocks back an hour with the end of Daylight Saving Time. But leaders in northern Cyprus opted against the switch and followed the example of Turkey, who scrapped the time change on the grounds that it causes needless confusion. As a result, Nicosia [nick oh see uh], Cyprus, now holds a distinction: It is the only world capital that follows two time zones at the same time. And both husband and wife admit they are not sure what to do on New Year’s Eve. [I know what I’d do. I’d celebrate it with the early side and go to bed!] Some islanders celebrate New Year’s Eve by one clock, pass through the buffer-zone and celebrate the New Year all over again. But, hold on: if they wait for spring and the return of Daylight Saving Time, all the Cypriots will be back on one time zone. (“Nikolia Apostolou and Iakovos Hatzistavrou, “This is the only world capital with two time zones,” *USA Today*, 12/14/2016)

That would be a nightmare, wouldn’t it? But that’s exactly the way Christians live. We live by the earthly clock and the cosmic clock.

Now, in a closing move, Paul links ethics (submitting to authorities, loving your neighbor) with eschatology. Jesus is going to return; the time is near. The audience knows (1 Thessalonians 5), that the end will come suddenly and unpredictably, like a thief in the night.

He closes with this image of waiting and hoping – waiting and suffering and hoping. It sounds like Isaiah 33 or Genesis 49. With the coming of the Christ, the wait time has narrowed. The time when both the cosmic clock and the earthly clock combine into one is near; then, we’re all simply on divine time.

He makes the comparison between sleeping and waking, between night and day, light and darkness, drunkenness and sobriety. All these combine to communicate we’re in the night of waiting, but in the morning He comes. Be ready. Put on the armor of light. The time zone of this world is passing away, and the time zone of the new age has broken into history through Christ, His crucifixion, and glorious resurrection. Therefore, you live out everything, knowing the end is year.

Christians should throw off the reassuring mantras of peace and security and get ready for the new day by putting on the armor of light and living as those who belong to light (Ephesians 5; Colossians 1). Paul always insists the time is short (1 Corinthians 7), the day is near (Romans 13), and, therefore, all earthly governments are lame ducks, for their days are numbered.

There is nothing else that has to happen before Christ returns. Nothing. Wake up every day and say, “This might be the day” – when the cosmic clock collides, for us, with Central Standard Time. How would it change the direction of your day if you saw each day as the day you would meet your Christ?

Respect authority. Love your neighbor. And look for the Lord to return.

Let us pray.

(David Garland, forthcoming commentary on Romans)