Romans 13, 1-14

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Lesson: Christians' response to earthly leaders

Everyone in our class, or taking the time to read this lesson online later, is investing this time because you want to understand God's guidance so that you can apply it to your heart and be closer to God. You want to step where God wants you to step. You want to be a good and Christian example to everyone around you.

We each have different experiences that have shaped our interpretation of God's guidance. The lives we lead outside of the church are so different from each other even in this small community. It is our desire to understand God's guidance and be closer to Him that we have in common.

Today's lesson could draw out those different experiences and the different lives we go back to on Monday, so as we start, let's all set our patience and love for each other where God said it should be.

Matthew 22:36–40 (KJV)

36 Master, which is the great commandment in the law?

37 Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.

38 This is the first and great commandment.

39 And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.

40 On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

Loving your neighbor means to treat the other person with the same practical regard, protection, and goodwill that you naturally give to your own life and well-being.

- Refusing to take vengeance or hold a grudge (Leviticus 19:18).
- Meeting concrete needs (the Samaritan’s bandages, oil, wine, and money).
- Speaking truthfully, dealing justly, and protecting the vulnerable.

- Doing good even to those who oppose you (Romans 12:17–21).

I believe that each week, the lesson that is presented to me is by God's design. He set in place the plan for the quarterly, the selection of verses, the timing of each lesson, and everything that put us all here together, down to the rotation of teaching between David and I. If that seems like a lot of fine detail to put onto the shoulders of a God that designed the universe, it shouldn't.

This is a challenging lesson for me because I am very engaged in the work, and especially the failings of our leaders. It is hard for me to see a Muslim elected to rule over Americans, when I know they will bring great harm, not just to the people under their rule, but to the country as a whole. I know that everything they believe, down to the way they treat their children is against God's design for men, husbands and fathers.

Some people read the verses assigned to us today, which we will eventually get to, and use them to justify sitting quietly while evil spreads.

As I read the lesson, I wanted to look up Jesus' own guidance about loving our own neighbor that we've just read, but I - not accidentally - turned instead to Matthew 23, and I read Jesus' own words spoken to the religious leaders, and the energy and tone of His words resonate with my own words spoken against the evil in our government, that I know the accident of flipping to the wrong chapter was just as ordained as the design of me being the teacher of this lesson today.

A short time after Jesus spoke in Matthew 22:37-39, he spoke these words.

> "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye shut up the kingdom of heaven against men…" (v. 13)
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> "Woe unto you… for ye devour widows' houses, and for a pretence make long prayer…" (v. 14)
>
> "Woe unto you… for ye compass sea and land to make one proselyte, and when he is made, ye make him twofold more the child of hell than yourselves." (v. 15)
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> He calls them blind guides, fools, whited sepulchres, serpents, and a generation of vipers (vv. 16–33), and declares that upon them will come "all the righteous blood shed upon the earth" (vv. 34–36).

Jesus is not setting aside the love commandment; He is applying it. The scribes and Pharisees were the very people who claimed to be the guardians and teachers of the

Law that contains “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.” In practice they were doing the opposite:

> They burdened ordinary people with heavy loads they themselves would not touch (Matthew 23:4).
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> They neglected “the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith” (Matthew 23:23).
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> They devoured widows’ houses while making a show of long prayers (Matthew 23:14).
>
> They shut the kingdom of heaven against those who were seeking it (Matthew 23:13).

In other words, they were actively harming their neighbors.

Jesus’ woes exposed them. Loving our neighbors includes protecting them from those who mislead and exploit them. Love for God includes refusing to let His name and His Law be used as a cloak for injustice and hypocrisy.

So now, the stage is set by the Holy Spirit's leadership for us to better understand today's lesson.

Romans 13:1–7 (KJV)

> 1 Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God.
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> 2 Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation.
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> 3 For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same:
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> 4 For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil.
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> 5 Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake.
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> 6 For for this cause pay ye tribute also: for they are God's ministers, attending continually upon this very thing.

> 7 Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honour to whom honour.

The Roman empire in Paul's time acted unfairly and persecuted Christians. He said that Christians should still pay taxes and render them their due respect. Later, when authorities ordered the apostles to stop preaching Christ, they replied "We ought to obey God rather than men (Acts 5:29). Submission to civil authority meets its limits when it requires disobedience to God.

Romans 13:4: For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil.

That description is a statement of the proper role of government, not a guarantee that every government always fulfills it.

When a government begins to treat good as evil and evil as good, or when it seeks to impose a legal system that contradicts the moral law God has revealed, Christians are not required to treat that system as righteous simply because it holds power.

Shariah law, contains provisions on blasphemy, apostasy, the status of non-Muslims, family law, and criminal punishments that stand in clear conflict with biblical teaching and with the equal-protection principles of the U.S. Constitution.

Romans 13 does not require Christians to treat the intentional introduction of such a legal framework as a morally neutral development simply because it is being pursued through electoral or legislative means.

In a constitutional republic, the ordinary means of opposition are lawful ones - voting, speech, legislation, and the courts. Those means are available precisely because the American context differs from the Roman one.

Americans have a vote and a voice. Using them is not the same thing as the violent resistance Paul condemns. It is the ordinary exercise of the civic responsibility **that exists under the form of government God has allowed in America**.

It does not require the conclusion that every proposed law is just, nor does it forbid Christians from working, through lawful means, to prevent the imposition of a legal system that contradicts God’s revealed will.

No government can ultimately stop a person from seeking God. Even if Bibles are banned, freedom is removed, violence is permitted against citizens, and believers are killed, the soul can still turn to Him.

Romans 8:35–39 (KJV)

35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?
36 As it is written, For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.
37 Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us.
38 For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come,
39 Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 8:35–39 makes that clear: nothing can separate God's people from His love. That truth has sustained Christians under every kind of tyranny.

But the ability of God to preserve His people through suffering is not the same thing as indifference to the suffering itself, or to the systems that produce it.

Scripture repeatedly shows that God is not neutral toward injustice, the oppression of the weak, the perversion of justice, or the elevation of false religious systems that harm people and suppress truth.

The prophets were sent precisely because God was not ambivalent about how nations treated the vulnerable or how they ordered their public life. He judges both individuals and nations for these things.

Romans 13:1–7 describes the proper role of government - restraining evil and supporting good - not a claim that God is unconcerned when governments do the opposite.

When a legal system institutionalizes practices that contradict God's revealed will (whether in the treatment of women and children, the punishment of those who leave a religion, or the denial of equal justice to outsiders), that is not a matter about which Scripture presents God as indifferent.

The same God who can keep His people faithful under persecution is also the God who hates the shedding of innocent blood, the perversion of justice, and the exaltation of idols.

So, the two truths stand together: worldly governments cannot stop a person from pursuing God, and God is not ambivalent about the moral character of the

laws and systems that dominate a society. The first is a word of comfort and courage for believers; the second is a reason to care about the direction of the laws under which they and their neighbors live.

Romans 13:8–10 (KJV)

8 Owe no man any thing, but to love one another: for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law.

9 For this, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Thou shalt not covet; and if there be any other commandment, it is briefly comprehended in this saying, namely, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.

10 Love worketh no ill to his neighbour: therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.

Our awesome God provides us with guidance that is straightforward but challenging to keep, and guidance whose full reach is challenging to live out, like loving our neighbor as ourselves. We need to rely on the Holy Spirit. He is the one who gives us insight into God's word, and He is the one who strengthens us when we face the temptation to withhold that love or to resist the authorities He has ordained.

1 Corinthians 2:10–14 (KJV)

10 But God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit: for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God.

11 For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him? even so the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God.

12 Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God.

13 Which things also we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual.

14 But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.

John 16:13 (KJV)

> 13 Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will shew you things to come.

"Loving our neighbor as ourselves" is not mainly difficult to understand in its basic sense. Jesus and Paul both treat its meaning as accessible: it is the active commitment to the other person's good that matches the care we already have for our own lives, and it "worketh no ill to his neighbour" (Romans 13:10).

What is genuinely difficult is the consistent doing of it - especially toward people we dislike, people who oppose us, or people who have harmed us.

> 9 For this, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Thou shalt not covet; and if there be any other commandment, it is briefly comprehended in this saying, namely, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.

Each of these behaviors are harmful to others and are the opposite of loving our neighbor.

A 2021 study calculated that the annual costs of criminal activities is $2.6 trillion[1].

For comparison, the cost of crime is

- 100 times NASA's yearly budget
- 1.5 times Social Security spending
- 3 times military spending

Imagine the positive things we could invest in, if everyone followed God's guidance.

No more challenging passwords, security systems, police spending, lost productivity. It makes you sad for our world and makes you long for Heaven.

Romans 13:11–14 (KJV)

> 11 And that, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep: for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed.
> 12 The night is far spent, the day is at hand: let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armour of light.
> 13 Let us walk honestly, as in the day; not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying.

> 14 But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof.

Paul encourages the Romans to lift their focus up from the challenges of daily life, and to shove aside the temptations they tease themselves with.

Have you ever seen a young person that is struggling to launch? They just meander through life, without the determination to achieve anything great, barely coping with feeding themselves, spending money on frivolous things instead of trying to get to a better position for their lives?

You want to shake sense into them, to say "Wake up, wake up! This is your life, your only life make something of it, stop stalling and seize the day!"

Paul feels this, he tells them that the end is near, much nearer than they believe and it is time to shove aside their dark interests and put on an "armor of light".

Q: What is an "armor of light"?

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

Jesus is the light that Paul refers to. He's telling the Romans to essentially pull Jesus down over them to cover themselves. This shows the world the person we want to be like, and it protects us, as armor, from the darkness of the world.

> 13 Let us walk honestly, as in the day; not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying.
> 14 But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof.

You can't put on the armor of light and tease yourself with earthly temptations at the same time, you have to choose and Paul is like us when we see someone that is meandering through life, he's shaking them awake, and telling them the time for dawdling in earthly darkness needs to end - now.

The time is surely now.

References

1 Ted R. Miller et al., "Incidence and Costs of Personal and Property Crimes in the USA, 2017," *Journal of Benefit-Cost Analysis* 12, no. 1 (2021): 24–54, doi.org/10.1017/bca.2020.36.