

BIBLE STUDY: ROMANS #13

Scripture of Lesson: Romans 13: 1~14

From Chapter 12 Paul sets forth some important guidelines on how Christians ought to live if they were to live as living sacrifices before God. It is noteworthy that this epistle was written only a few years before the great persecution by Emperor Nero in AD 65. The letter was likely written during the period of AD 60-62 from Corinth prior to Paul's departure on a journey towards Jerusalem, where he was arrested and put on a trial before King Agrippa and the Roman governor, Festus. In Chapter 13 Paul teaches the Roman Christians to submit to the authorities. And they showed meek sheep-like spirit, just as Christ did on the cross, when they were brought to the great coliseum before the Gentile crowd cheering the lions to devour them and the executioners to butcher them. We now see God's providence in using Paul to write this epistle to His children in Rome beforehand to prepare their hearts and spirit prior to the coming wave of persecutions.

1. Christians ought to obey the authorities of the state: v. 1~7

Paul teaches Christians to submit to the higher powers [v. 1] because those in authority are "ministers of God for good [v. 4]." This teaching has been controversial over the past centuries because there were many bad rulers, some of them evil and the Christians experienced conflicts between their duty to submit to their rulers and their desire to correct the wrongs of their society and the church that governed their lives, both spiritual and physical. So the question posed to us today is "Should we obey and submit to ANY political powers, even if they are evil in the sight of God?"

How did God's people do in this regard in OT days? Moses opposed the Egyptian regime of Pharaoh, performed ten plagues which must have destroyed the entire country, causing collapse of the Old Kingdom of Egypt as recorded in their history. As a result Moses led the people of God out of the life of bondage onto a journey towards the Promised Land. What about the period after entry into the Promised Land? People of Israel were under the oppressive rule of Philistines as a consequence of their unfaithfulness to God. Each time they cried out to God, whereupon God responded by sending a deliverer, such as Gideon and Samson. These leaders led the people of Israel to rebel against their oppressors and triumphed over them.

Christians in past centuries who were against the dogma and dictatorial, often cruel, rule of the Roman Catholic Church, fought to gain liberation from the church's hold on their spiritual and natural life. This resulted in formation of the Protestant movement that is still going on today. America was born as a free nation because those Christians yearning to be free from the British yoke of colonial rule fought and won the freedom. Likewise, the black people in this country fought, albeit in peaceful ways, for their liberation from the slavery. Asian peoples, such as the Koreans and the Chinese, fought for their countries' liberation from the Japanese colonial rule. Christians and non-Christians have fought against evil, oppressive rulers to gain freedom and to advance their nations towards a liberated state. So, how does this teaching of Paul apply to the Christians in the 21st century? Was Paul wrong in giving this guideline or was his teaching pertinent in the first century only? Does this guideline need a qualifier such as "submit to just authorities?"

Paul was not the only apostle who taught submission to the political powers to the flock.

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]

The tenet of this 'submission' teaching comes from the apostles' unforgettable memory of their Lord Jesus' submission to the powers in being although He was God the Son Himself.

And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. [Philippians 2: 8]

These apostles had the following OT prophesy about the nature of their Master in mind when they witnessed His meek submission to the authorities and willingly walked the way to Calvary:

*He was oppressed and He was afflicted,
Yet He opened not His mouth;
He was led as a lamb to the slaughter,
And as a sheep before its shearers is silent,
So He opened not His mouth. [Isaiah 53: 7]*

During His entire life Jesus never taught anyone to rebel against either the colonial rule of Rome or the secular rule of Herod and his family over Israel, although John the Baptizer criticized their behaviors. It does not mean that Jesus condoned their manner of ruling. So in this teaching of 'submission to powers,' there is a difference between the outward submission to the authorities with the inward submission to God and willing participation or collaboration with a wrongful political power in rule. During the first three centuries of persecution against the Christians, the people of God had to submit to the authorities to the extent possible. However, they did not let themselves become willing partakers of such political powers. Rather they sought to avoid persecution as much as possible, but when waves of persecution came to their doors, many of them bravely met the tormentors in pure faith in Jesus Christ, thus manifesting the same spirit that Jesus did on Calvary.

Discussion topic: Where is the limit of our obedience to the authority if the governing regime is evil? There are numerous examples in OT where leaders of Israel led the people to rebel and to overcome the ruling powers of the times. What is the meaning of this seeming contrary instruction of Paul in the first century?

2. How Christians should live (2): v. 8~14

In continuation from the later part of Chapter 12 Paul sets for the additional guidelines for Christian living. Paul emphasizes the Lord's commandment to love your neighbor [v. 8]. Those who love their neighbors fulfill the law, whether Mosaic or the secular law of today [v. 8, 10]. How can we love our neighbors better? Who are our neighbors in the 21st century? Lately we see photographs and videos of refugees fleeing from their own countries seeking freedom from terror. Are they our neighbors to love? What are Christian nations doing to show their love towards these people in need?

The attraction of the flesh to satisfy its wants and desires is the same today as in the first century. Our flesh can easily be tempted to seek ways to satiate its craving whenever opportunities come along our way. Paul teaches the Christians to not give opportunities to the flesh to fulfill its lusts

[v. 14]. Let us discuss how such opportunities approach us and how we can avoid falling into such temptations.

Discussion topic: Why is Paul not recommending to comply with the Jewish rules of behavior to the first century Christians but are giving them new instructions for Christian living? Does it mean that the norms of Christian living can change from era to era?