



THE BELIEVER AND THE STATE

Paul has written about the personal challenges that face the believer and has told us that we must live the life of Christ – the new life. Now he directs our attention to our relationship with the present order of things in the world and, in chapter 13 of Romans, lays down some important guidelines for believers in all ages.

Rome was the capital city of the empire that then ruled the world and the Christian community at Rome, the “ecclesia” there, was right at the centre of things. The brethren and sisters would have seen the emperor from time to time and might even have known members of the Roman Senate. It is even possible that some of the believers may have worked for the state. Erastus was the city treasurer, for example (Romans 16:23), and Paul included him in the greetings that he sent.

❖ God Rules!

Paul told believers they must live transformed lives and not be “conformed to this world” (12:2), but what did he mean by that? Should they take part in government or legal matters, or should they separate themselves from such things now that they were God’s people and looked for His kingdom to come? Should the followers of Jesus protest against the established order if they found its rule contrary to the principles of the gospel? If so how should they do this? How would this fit in with their understanding that God is in charge of everything and that He will change things for good when the time is right for Him to do that? These are the very questions that Paul now writes about. For, at the start of chapter 13, this is what he says:

*“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. **For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.** Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgement. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer” (Romans 13:1-4).*

Long before Paul wrote that, under the direction of God’s Holy Spirit, the same lesson had been learned by a young Jewish exile in Babylon. The prophet Daniel was given an insight into future world history by the God who was directing operations, and this is the profound truth that Daniel learned:

*“Blessed be the name of God for ever and ever, to whom belong wisdom and might. He changes times and seasons; **he removes kings and sets up kings;** he gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding” (Daniel 2:21);*

And later:

*“**The Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will and sets over it the lowliest of men**” (4:17).*

We saw this principle to be especially true of God’s kingdom, when it existed on earth – God then appointed His kings and made them administrators of His law, giving them the remit to rule over His people in His land. Now we are being told that, in a somewhat different way, God oversees the rulership of the world and establishes powers and authorities which are in accordance with His purpose. Quite how that works we shall never know, though there is a hint given, later in Daniel’s prophecy, that God’s angels are at work behind the scenes to make sure that everything works out as God requires it.

So the powers that now exist – for good or ill so far as we are concerned – are in place because that is God’s will, and they are playing a part in His purpose, as everything moves towards the end of human rule and the beginning of the worldwide rulership of the Lord Jesus Christ. This does not mean that God is responsible for the errors or the atrocities that are sometimes committed by human rulers, for Daniel said that sometimes “*the lowliest of men*” are either appointed to rule, or seize power. Yet, in some way or other, God overrules and directs the entire process.

❖ Discovering God’s Will

Imagine what it would be like to oversee the government of the world and put in place its rulers - and only those who would achieve what you wanted to happen. Humanly speaking, such world government is an impossible task, as many who have attempted it have found out, to their cost. Even the very best of men would not know how to rule if given the authority to do so.

A believer in the gospel would also fail at this, for we do not know the mind of God in these matters. There are secret things which are hidden from us (Deuteronomy 29:29), and just how God rules in the kingdoms of men is one of them. Notice that Paul says two things that come together to solve our difficulty:

- 1 That we must “discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Romans 12:2).
- 2 Given that it would be impossible for us to know how God wants the politics of the world to be arranged at any particular time, Paul tells us to be subject to the powers that God puts into place.

He goes on to say that we should pay any taxes that are levied upon us, and that our conduct should always be good and submissive. We are not here to change governments, but to await the coming government of God. We should use the opportunity we now have to change our own behaviour and help others to come to an understanding of what is about to happen on earth.

Here is a really sobering thought. In the first century, believers were being persecuted for their faith. The Roman emperor Nero wanted someone to blame for the great fire that had destroyed much of Rome which, incidentally, gave him great opportunities to redesign the city and extend his palace. He decided to blame the Christians and some awful things were done to early believers. Yet, writing to Jewish believers, including those in Rome, the apostle Peter said this:

“Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. Honour everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the emperor” (1 Peter 2:13-17).

There was no question of resistance or of political protest in the apostle’s mind. Whatever was happening was in accordance with God’s will and would eventually work out for the best, so the followers of Jesus must obey his teaching and accept his example. For when Jesus was reviled, he did not retaliate, but put himself completely in God’s hands; he was always submissive and obedient. The apostles say that that is how we should be too.

❖ **Citizenship**

The reasoning behind the commands we are being given is twofold:

- 1 We do not know what God’s will is in any given situation, so we are best advised to take no part whatsoever in political activity of any sort.**

Instead we should be bystanders and should concentrate on using the opportunities we have to develop our characters and to preach the gospel, being grateful for the things that come our way, under God’s good hand. Indeed, we are commanded to pray for the authorities and to be thankful:

“First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Saviour, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:1-4).

- 2 Once we are baptized we accept Jesus as king and pledge to be citizens of his kingdom, waiting for the time when he will return to rule as “King of kings and Lord of lords”.**

This is a very important change and one that brings with it all sorts of other considerations. All who are baptized, and who become the servants of Christ, are under his command from then on. In truth, they are citizens of his heavenly kingdom and are subject to his command. They can never exchange his lordship for the rulership of man, not can they give allegiance to anyone else instead.

This is how the apostle Paul expresses the position of all who have become followers of the Lord Jesus Christ:

“Our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself” (Philippians 3:20,21).

“You are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God” (Ephesians 2:19).

Although we live in a world which is alien to God and which is opposed to His will and purpose, and which will resist the coming of the Lord when he returns from heaven, we have to be excellent citizens under this jurisdiction. Our position is just like that of an ambassador from another country who represents his ruler and his government. The way ambassadors conduct and behave themselves is an important way of conveying the values and standards of the country they represent. We are God's ambassadors. For once we are baptized into Christ we become His representatives on earth, showing, by the way we live, the values and standards of God's kingdom, So, Paul said:

"If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation ... Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God" (2 Corinthians 5:17-20).

❖ What all this Means

Scripture does not suggest that baptized believers should formally change their nationality, for there are no passports or identity documents issued for the Kingdom of God. We remain as we are, with our various national identities and responsibilities, and should be very thankful for the facilities and provisions of the state in which we live. As good citizens we are to do everything that is required of us, provided that it is in harmony with the law of God, which is more important than the mere commandments of men. Here are two examples from Bible times when there was a clash between what God commanded and what the law of the land said.

- ❖ **Daniel** once held an important position in the Persian Empire and was influential in helping one of the Persian kings to fulfil God's will by sending the Jewish exiles back to their land. Other courtiers resented his influence and plotted to overthrow him, but he was such a good-living man they knew the only way they could trap him would be to get the king to pass a law that was contrary to Daniel's beliefs. So they flattered the king and got a law passed that banned prayer to anyone other than the king himself, for a specified period of time. It was a direct challenge to Daniel's worship of God, so he had to disregard it whatever the consequences were. The result was that he was thrown into a den of hungry lions, but God delivered him because he had been faithful and obedient.
- ❖ Years later, the Jerusalem authorities tried to stop people believing in Jesus so they forbade the apostles **Peter and John** to preach or teach about him. This is what happened, for the law was expressly contrary to the commandment that Jesus had given – that the apostles were to preach the gospel in Jerusalem:

"Peter and John answered them, 'Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard.' And when they had further threatened them, they let them go, finding no way to punish them, because of the people, for all were praising God for what had happened" (Acts 4:19-21).

It follows that it may be all right for us to work for the government, or in the public services, as did Erastus the city treasurer and the prophet Daniel, but only in a capacity where we will not come into conflict with the law of Christ. No disciple of Jesus should be in a position where he or she could take absolute orders, which have to be obeyed regardless of conscience or other considerations. For example, service in the armed forces, or associated services, would be quite inappropriate, partly because it may involve swearing an oath of allegiance to the monarch or the government, and partly because such a role requires total obedience to military commands.

As the law of Christ has to come first and demands our absolute obedience, it is equally inappropriate to become involved in work which is on the fringe of military life, where believers could be drafted in to work in conjunction with armed forces, or who would work in support of them. Thus police work is to be avoided. There are other jobs such as being a prison warder or a security guard where violent conduct may be a necessary part of the jobs; indeed such people carry weapons to protect themselves and enforce their authority. These jobs should be avoided also.

Some soldiers once came to John the Baptist and asked him about their employment, as they were thinking about becoming his followers. It would have been very difficult for him to say "Stop working in that capacity"; that would have been seen as traitorous and he would probably have been imprisoned much earlier than actually happened. So he gave them this advice instead:

"Soldiers also asked him, 'And we, what shall we do?' And he said to them, 'Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages'" (Luke 3:14).

He gave them the moral teaching of the gospel that was applicable to their situation so that, as they thought about the implications of it in their lives, they would know what to do. They would soon see that their occupation was incompatible with gospel teaching and, if committed to it, would seek other work.

❖ **Conscience First**

We are to live as model citizens in a world order which is passing away, whilst we wait for a new world order and our coming king. If we do wrong under this human administration we will be punished for it here and now. For the institutions of human government, which often give us safety and stability and which look after many of our needs, also act as a restraint upon our wildest and silliest actions. The law of the land helps all of us to behave in a way which is helpful to others: for our safety and well-being as well as for that of everybody else. Imagine what it would be like if there were no laws regulating which side of the road vehicles were to drive on; or if there was no law to stop people killing or seriously hurting one another. We are all grateful for that protection. But notice what else Paul says:

*“Rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad ... For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer. **Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God’s wrath but also for the sake of conscience.** For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honour to whom honour is owed” (Romans 13:3-7).*

We have to live in a way which is right with our conscience. So, for example, it would be wrong for a believer to fight in a war, or to support a war by some form of active involvement. We have to be “conscientious objectors” to such activity because it is contrary to the law of Christ. Remember that we do not know what God’s will is in any given situation – who God might want to win a battle and who not – and none of us would want to be found fighting against the will of God. There have been dreadfully confusing times in the past when people professing to be Christians have fought against one another, each group praying to God for deliverance and asking for His help. That wrong thinking has done much to discredit Christianity and has resulted in people losing their faith and confidence in the gospel. But it is not the gospel that is then at fault; the people to blame are those who act in a way which makes the gospel of salvation seem contradictory.

Paul says that we should obey human law and be good citizens, as we are able, but on matters of Christian conscience we are to obey God rather than man. As we cannot imagine Jesus putting on the armour of a Roman soldier and going about killing people, neither should we. The time might come when we are asked to join the forces of righteousness and fight with the Lord Jesus and God’s holy angels. If that were ever to happen it would be the will of God that we should do so, and it would be against our conscience *not* to take part. But for the moment it is clear that we are the soldiers of Christ fighting a spiritual battle against the forces of darkness and ignorance, and that is the only battle in which we should be engaged.

❖ **Politics and the Courts of Law**

Everything that applies to involvement in armed warfare, directly or indirectly, applies also to any active involvement in politics. We belong to another leader and are looking to him to rule on earth and resolve all the present problems there are here. Therefore we should not put our allegiance in earthly rulers, nor should we vote for them or support their political organisations. That would be a denial of what we believe for we do not belong to this order of things, but to a heavenly kingdom.

We must obey man-made laws when they are not in opposition to God’s law, but we should neither try to change those laws nor seek to enforce them to our advantage. Courts of law are not places where believers should be found, either practising in the legal profession or seeking to get the law enforced to their advantage. Some believers find this hard to accept but the Bible is quite clear about it. It is better to suffer wrong than to go to a court of law to get things decided by a human administration. The apostle Paul said:

“When one of you has a grievance against another, does he dare go to law before the unrighteous instead of the saints? Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases? ... Can it be that there is no one among you wise enough to settle a dispute between the brothers, but brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers? To have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you. Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded? But you yourselves wrong and defraud – even your own brothers” (1 Corinthians 6:1-8).

If we do find this principle hard to accept, and want to justify ourselves if wronged, we should look to the example of Christ. The apostle Peter wrote these words of the Lord to help us in such situations:

“Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example so that you might follow in his steps ... when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him (God) who judges justly” (1 Peter 2: 21-23).

The law courts of this world are not places to frequent because they administer human law and it is not always in harmony with God’s law. This is a very important distinction to understand. What man decides as acceptable for society and appropriate in terms of personal behaviour may or may not be acceptable in the sight of God. At all times, we should remember God’s code of conduct and must try to live according to that. If there are problems and disputes between believers they should be resolved between believers within the ecclesia, drawing upon the wisdom and experience of other members if necessary. The believer has a much higher standard by which to live, for he or she will ultimately be judged by the Lord Jesus Christ.

❖ **The Law of Love**

It is this standard that the apostle Paul now refers to in his letter:

*“Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,’ and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ **Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law**” (Romans 13:8-10).*

If we live according to the guiding principle that we should love one another we will not go wrong, says the apostle. For he explains that it is the guiding principle in everything that God has done and that love was the driving force in everything that Jesus said and did. The Lord made it clear that love is not an optional extra – something we could do if we feel like it. It is a matter of command. Once, having washed his disciples’ feet as an act of humble service, Jesus said:

*“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. **By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another**” (John 13:34,35).*

This is a very far-reaching law indeed but it can be summarized quite easily. We should always do to others as we would want them to do to us, and we should always try to act in a way that we think Jesus would have acted. Paul gives some specific illustrations in those few verses of things we should not want to do. He mentions adultery, murder, stealing and wanting other people’s things, as matters that would be against the law of love, and elsewhere he talks about other things too.

❖ **Separation**

Just after the passage where Paul said we are to be God’s ambassadors on earth, he goes on to say:

“Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God” (2 Corinthians 6:14-16).

Believers should marry believers, says the apostle, and should avoid any situation where they are affected by the unlawful and ungodly behaviour of others. This means that, in trying to live a Christ-like life, we should spend our time with other believers and make them our companions. When we are with other people we should be very careful to live according to the law of Christ – the law of love – so that our way of life will itself witness to the things we now believe and do.

We live in the world, but the world is a very dangerous place for believers. It is organised according to human ideas and is inhabited by people who have very different values, and it has always been like that. Before his death Jesus prayed to his Father for his followers in these words:

*“I am praying for them. **I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours ... I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world**” (John 17:9-16).*

The challenge of Christian discipleship is to live in the world as though we were just visitors here; biding our time until our future permanent home arrives. That is how the faithful managed in ancient times, some of them preferring to be tent dwellers rather than living in a house, so that they would never forget they were just “*strangers and pilgrims*”. They lived in the world but they didn’t belong

to the world and that is how we must try to live as well. Then, when the Lord Jesus Christ returns, we shall be ready to leave everything we know now and go with him, wherever he leads. This is precisely the point that Paul now makes in his letter:

*“Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law. Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. **For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed.** The night is far gone; the day is at hand. **So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armour of light.** Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarrelling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires” (Romans 13:10-14).*

The coming of Jesus is nearer than we might imagine. We tend to think that things will go on for ever, as they are now, but the purpose of God is drawing towards its intended end. God rules in the kingdoms of men. He has put in place people who will work things out as He requires and as His will directs and He is now engaged in the final act of His divine drama. Many of us now living should see the coming of the Lord Jesus, or so it would seem. But even if we die first, our next conscious moment will be resurrection from the dead at the appearance of the Lord. No wonder Paul could say: *“Salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed”*, for he was that much older and that much nearer his own death. And so are we – all of us! Time marches on and the more time we spend thinking about things the less time there is left in which to do the right things.

❖ A Change of Clothes

When Paul warns about the nearness of the coming of the Lord Jesus he uses military language to remind us that we are engaged in the Lord’s battles, not those of men. The armour we are to wear is *“the armour of light”* and we are fighting against the forces of darkness and ignorance. That is a big challenge that affects our daily behaviour in all sorts of ways – big things as well as little. That is why he goes on to list some of the daily dangers that could lead us astray – *“orgies and drunkenness”, “sexual immorality and sensuality”, and “quarrelling and jealousy”*.

The believer has to live a holy life, one free from immorality and sexual licence, a life where we remain in control of our feelings. Our fleshly feelings will not change overnight: the flesh still has desires and an appetite which it would like us to satisfy. The challenge for the believer is to put those feelings to death – to *“make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires”*. We do this, says the apostle, by putting on the Lord Jesus Christ.

This picture is one the apostle has used before. Writing to the believers at Colossae, in Asia Minor, Paul said:

*“**Put to death** therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming. In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. But now you must **put them all away**: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have **put on the new self**, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator ... **Put on then**, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these **put on love**, which binds everything together in perfect harmony” (Colossians 3:5-14).*

When we are baptized into Christ we declare publicly that we want to change our way of life and start to live like Jesus. Day by day the baptized believer has to put into practice the life of Christ – by putting away the things that belonged to the old life and putting on the things that belong to the new self, the new life. From our baptism we have to try to live as did Jesus in holiness and purity. That will affect, says Paul:

- our sexual appetites – *“Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion”*;
- our wants and desires for things, including those things that others have but we do not – *“evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry”*;
- our feelings – *“anger, wrath, malice”*;
- the things we say – *“slander, and obscene talk from your mouth”*;
- our truthfulness – *“Do not lie to one another”*.

❖ New Life in Christ

Paul tells us that we should replace the feelings with which we were born – our natural affections and desires – with a new set of values and desires – those that belong to the life in Christ. Looking at one example should make things clear.

Sexual immorality is forbidden, but sex is not: it is recognised as a God-given gift. It is possible that the apostle Paul did not marry, but he recognised that others were made differently and that they would need a companion. God had provided one for Adam, and men and women were meant for each other, but sex is only to take place within marriage.

If you want to look up some of the Scriptures that talk about this, here are some helpful references: *Genesis 2:23-24; Proverbs 18:22; Malachi 2:14-16; Matthew 19:3-9; Mark 10:6-12; Romans 7:2; 1 Corinthians 6:16,17; 7:2-4,10,11; 11:8-9; Ephesians 5:28-31; 1 Timothy 5:14; 1 Peter 3:1-7.*

There are some churches that forbid marriage. That is quite wrong, for Paul declares marriage to be something “*that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth*” (1 Timothy 4:3). It is something to be held in honour (Hebrews 13:4), and both husband and wife are commanded to live within that relationship, each in a way that respects and honours the other. For the relationships and friendships we have form a vital part of living a new life, and it is about our relationship with others that the apostle now writes as he brings his Letter to the Romans towards its conclusion.

Things to Read

- 📖 Psalm 110 gives us a picture of the Lord Jesus Christ who has ascended to heaven where he sits in glory at his Father’s right hand. Notice what it says about those who are the people of this coming king.
- 📖 Philippians chapter 4 tells us how to focus our minds upon those things that are lovely and fulfilling and shows us the way we should live joyfully and contentedly.

Questions to Answer

- 26.1 We are to live apart from the world and its values and interests. What does that mean in terms of our employment, and active participation in things like politics and the legal system? (Ephesians 4:17; 5:7-11; Romans 12:2; 2 Corinthians 6:14-18)
- 26.2 If marriage is a God-given relationship, how should a man and woman live together in a way which is pleasing to God and in harmony with the law of Christ? (Ephesians 5:21-33; Colossians 3:18-19; 1 Peter 3:7; 1 Corinthians 7:12-15,39)