

w e e k 4 f o u r

Discover

Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. **2** Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. **3** For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended. **4** For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. **5** Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience.

6 This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. **7** Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.

8 Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law. **9** The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery," "You shall not murder," "You shall not steal," "You shall not covet," and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." **10** Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.

11 And do this, understanding the present time: The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. **12** The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. **13** Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. **14** Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh.



Discover

Our journey alongside Paul and the church in Rome draws our attention to chapter thirteen. After an initial reading, chapter thirteen verses one through seven feel like an abrupt change in the conversation as Paul asks these Jesus followers to submit to the governance of the empire. Paul does not mention specific laws or obligations to the Roman Empire apart from paying taxes mirroring the instruction of Jesus to "give to Caesar what is Caesar's." I find a great resistance swell in me as Paul emphasizes that we are called to submit to an institution because God grants societal powers the ability to enact God's good, perfect, and pleasing will on the earth. I find it difficult for Paul to grant any authority to an institution where the emperor claims a god-like status and these Jesus followers will encounter persecution, exile, and death at the hands of Rome. Surely Paul would not claim that this suffering experienced by the church or the threat to her future were ordained by the good will of God?

As we consider these questions, I find it helpful to turn our attention to Paul's audience. Why would Paul share this instruction with the church in Rome? Paul's audience is a fledgling group of Jesus followers considered a cult by the Roman Empire and void of any political influence. The Roman Empire was a dominating force that spread its tight grasp to engulf countless cultures and kingdoms. The decision by any member of the community to, in outrage, refuse to pay an unfair tax could risk the safety of the entire church. Tension and unrest were not unfamiliar among the Jews during Jesus' own time on the earth as the empire occupied the lands of Israel. This conflict spurred many towards violence. Is Paul anticipating this same spirit of hostility against the empire to stir members of the church towards violent action and encourage unwanted attention to fall upon the church? There is so much at risk in the church in Rome. Is Paul's emphasis due to this potential threat? How does this lens impact our understanding of this text and its application for modern Jesus followers and our relationship with our government?

Are there situations where institutions can enact the good, perfect, and pleasing will of God? Paul concludes chapter twelve by challenging the Jesus followers to not seek revenge or to repay evil against their enemies but to trust that God will ensure justice on their behalf. When institutions ensure consequences for harmful and evil actions against human beings or against creation, does this align with God's will that violence will not be perpetuated on the earth? When institutions pursue healing and restoration as Rwanda did in 1999 by establishing the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission after civil war and genocide marred the nation, does this aim reflect God's will on the earth? Can an institution be a servant of God? Why would we choose to vote if we did not believe or desire that God's will could be furthered through institutions whose influence impacts countless lives?





Discover

Can an institution violate the will of God? We need to glance only briefly at the history of human beings to notice the consistent failings of powerful structures wielding authority over others. Just as we must choose to submit our lives to be transformed by God's good, perfect, and pleasing will, just as we must learn to embody the goodness of God on the earth, institutions governed by fellow humans must themselves choose to submit to the authority that is higher than they whose will alone can bring justice and healing and wholeness to society. This is why it is essential that Paul places God as the authority greater than any institution or government, principality or power on the earth.

I find it beautiful how Paul transitions from this conversation concerning engagement with the Empire to bookend this entire section with the same reminder that we are called to be a people that love extravagantly. We are called to be a people who love our enemies and our neighbors, those who are not Jesus followers but live beside us. In their book, *Kingdom Ethics*, David P. Gushee and Glen Stassen highlight that "Romans 13: 1-7 is about owing nothing but love to our enemies, including the Roman government, and making peace with them." The question that arises is what does love demand of us?

As Jesus followers in America, how does this conversation inform our engagement with our particular government in 2020. How do we seek peace? How do we love our neighbor? How do we ensure the good, perfect, and pleasing will of God is impacting the lives of our neighbors and our society in a system where we have influence and voice? I encourage us to continue wrestling with this conversation as Jesus followers throughout history and beneath the governance of empires, monarchies, states, fiefdoms, republics, democracies and dictatorships struggled to live with God as their highest authority and owe no one anything but love for their neighbor, a debt we cannot repay such is the love we receive from our beloved King.



Pray

Monday

Our God of history and power,

Thank you for the institutions and structures that fulfill your purposes and align with your good, perfect, and pleasing will. Help me to see those in positions of power as fellow humans with incredible potential to be your servants and accomplish your will. I pray that you will embed your presence in the governing systems that order our society. I pray you will purge corruption. I pray you will work through these structures to accomplish your good for our neighbors.

Tuesday

“This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God’s servants, who give their full time to governing. Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.” Romans 13:6-7

Our God who is worthy of respect and honor,

You have done so much for me, not because of any benefit that I have given you, but simply because of your great unbounded love for me. I confess that I have not even scratched the surface in giving you the adoration, respect, and love this is rightfully belongs to you alone. In respect to you, let me show respect and honor to the institutions that govern our society, though these systems are not always respectful. Though I loathe paying taxes, help me to cheerfully pay my share without cheating or fudging the numbers because I trust that you are the one taking care of me and there is no need to take matters into my own hands. Because of your goodness, help me to give taxes, fees, payment, respect, and honor to everyone, even my enemies, as an expression of my adoration of you.

Wednesday

“Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery,” “You shall not murder,” “You shall not steal,” “You shall not covet,” and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.” Romans 13:8-10

Our God who is the very definition of love,

I admit that at times I read the commandments and feel good about myself as if I had fulfilled my duty to you. And while I may not have been causing any person major harm, which is good, I have missed the point of doing good and showing love even where it is not deserved. God, help me today to express your love to someone new or in ways that I have missed in the past.





Serve

Loving Our Neighbors

Paul echoes the commandment of Jesus to “love your neighbor as you love yourself.” Paul adds an additional emphasis that “love does no harm to a neighbor.” In this context the “neighbors” of the church in Rome are not Jesus followers. Imagine the differences that exist between the Jesus followers and their neighbors. Rome is a place where worship of idols is pervasive, sex is currency, and violence maintains order. Paul does not provide a caveat to loving and doing no harm to the neighbors of the church in Rome. The behavior of these neighbors is not a license to behave in a non-loving way towards them.

Our invitation today is to consider how we can love our neighbors. I invite you to embrace the tension of loving the neighbors whose lifestyles or behavior are dissimilar to your own. The significance and power of this command is lost when we love only those who are like us, who reflect our values. The church in Rome is living in a distinctly non-Christian society and Paul challenges them to love and do no harm to those who do not clothe themselves with Christ. How is God inviting us to love our neighbors?



Reflect

The following questions are designed to help you reflect more deeply on the themes we explore together as we journey through Paul's letter to the Romans. I invite you to make space to sit with these questions without any need for a quick or clear answer. As you settle into a quiet and comfortable space, I encourage you to discuss these questions with God. Ask God to prompt you, to guide your thoughts, or bring up new questions that could be more helpful to you.

- 1 I invite you to re-read chapters twelve and thirteen. What common themes emerge as you read this portion of our text? How does Paul's conversation evolve or shift in these two chapters?
- 2 What tension or excitement rises in you as you explore Romans chapter thirteen? It is important that we acknowledge that tension and resistance are not "bad" emotions or experiences but often serve as an opportunity to grow with God.
- 3 In his study guide on Romans, *Romans for Everyone*, N.T. Wright calls us to remember Paul's interactions with the Roman Empire in Acts 16:35-40 and 23:1-3. I invite you to read these portions from Acts and then reflect on Paul's conversation with the church in Rome about their own engagement with the empire.
- 4 How do we owe no one anything but a debt of love? How does love fulfill all other aspects of the law? How does this emphasis challenge the way we interact with our government, our enemies, our neighbors, or our fellow Jesus followers?
- 5 At the close of chapter thirteen, Paul urges these Jesus followers that deliverance is nearer than they can imagine. In light of this impending salvation, Paul emphasizes the need for a life of integrity where our actions can be fully known and witnessed by others without the threat of punishment or shame. How can we act and respond and speak in such a way that even our enemies acknowledge that we are clothed with Christ?





Embody

Prayer for the Institutions that Govern our Society

In Romans chapter thirteen, we discover that institutions of power and influence in our society can be servants of God to ensure that the good, perfect, and pleasing will of God becomes a reality in the lived experience of Jesus followers and their neighbors. Prayer is a powerful activity with innumerable benefits. Prayer is a catalyst for transformation. It is a conversation that draws our attention to God but it is equally a conversation that draws our attention outward, directing us towards others as God shares a vision for the world. A crucial first step towards change, towards transformation, is acknowledgement. A crucial first step towards forging a new path is acknowledgement. Acknowledgement of what is not good, not right, not of God's will moves us towards change. We cannot begin to alter a structure or system or ourselves if we cannot acknowledge corruption. An acknowledgement of what is good, what is a blessing, what is of God's will compels us to continue moving in a direction. How can we strive to live more fully in alignment with God's will if we do not bear witness to its presence in our world?

Prayer calls us to acknowledge when evil and corruption are present as we converse with God about the circumstances that impact our lives and the lives of our neighbors. Prayer calls us to acknowledge the fruits of the spirit manifesting in our lives and the lives of others as we express gratitude and thanksgiving to God. I invite you to meet God in prayer and ask God to help you acknowledge God's presence in the institutions and systems that help order our society. Greater awareness of God's presence can help us support the systems that bring goodness to our neighbors. I invite you to also ask God to help you acknowledge where wickedness thrives and ourselves or our neighbors experience oppression. Greater awareness of the lack of God's will in these spaces challenges us to use any measure of the authority God has granted us in this society to work against the spread of this will that is not in alignment with God. I invite us to pray for our government at federal, state, and local levels. Unlike the Jesus followers in Rome, many of us hold influence within the systems that govern our communities. We desperately need to use this privilege to ensure that our neighbors do not suffer but benefit from the governance and protection of an institution that serves in alignment with God's will.

