

Represent

BELIEVERS REPRESENT CHRIST WELL BY HONORING CIVIL
LEADERS AND LOVING THEIR NEIGHBORS.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German pastor and theologian. His life and death have come to symbolize the challenge of obeying God, loving others, and honoring civil authority. In 1933, in a radio broadcast, Bonhoeffer was one of the earliest German Christians to voice a warning against the dangers of idolizing Adolph Hitler. As the Nazi regime sought to bring the German Protestant Church under state control, Bonhoeffer became a leading figure in the Confessing Church, a movement that insisted on the church's allegiance to Christ above all. Banned from teaching, Bonhoeffer established an underground seminary emphasizing spiritual discipline, simplicity, and brotherhood. His book *The Cost of Discipleship* written during this period argued that true Christian faith demands the willingness to follow Christ even when it leads to suffering.

As Nazi atrocities intensified, Bonhoeffer became part of a resistance network that helped Jews escape Germany. Despite his Christian pacifism, Bonhoeffer eventually concluded that faithfulness to God and Christian love sometimes requires actively opposing evil. In April 1943, he was arrested for his involvement in the resistance and imprisoned at Tegel Military Prison in Berlin. Even in confinement, he continued to minister to fellow prisoners and write. On April 9, 1945, just weeks before Germany's surrender, Bonhoeffer was executed by hanging at Flossenbürg concentration camp on Hitler's orders.

Fortunately, most of us will never face a situation as extreme as Bonhoeffer's. We will be able to submit to governing authorities, honor God, and live out Christian love all at the same time, just as Jesus taught (Mark 12:29-31; Luke 20:25). Paul also urged the church to do these three things. He told the believers that they should strive to live at peace with everyone as far as it depended on them (12:17-18) and that they should submit to governing authorities (13:1-7). At the same time, he reminded them of their obligation to love others (vv. 8-10) and to obey Christ (vv. 11-14). Today, as we study Paul's writings focused on these three Christian obligations, we should also thank God that we are fortunate enough to live in a country that allows us the freedom to do all three.

Romans 13:1-14

Persons transformed by their faith in Jesus serve God and serve in the church by exercising the gifts given by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 12:1-8). They should also treat others as genuine love dictates and as the Lord leads. This applies to people both inside and outside the church (vv. 9-21).

Paul knew that interactions with others, including government officials, did not always go well (2 Cor. 11:24-33). So, he urged believers living in a non-Christian society to “do what is honorable in everyone’s eyes” and to “live at peace with everyone,” but added the qualifier, “as far as it depends on you” (Rom. 12:17-18). The qualifier recognizes that various groups outside the church might force a conflict that the church could not avoid and still maintain its Christian commitments and witness.

Believers sometimes faced situations where the governing authorities told them not to do things that God commanded them to do, or they demanded believers to do things that God had told them not to do (Acts 4:18-20; 5:40). How were believers to function in such a world? Paul addressed the matter in an effort to help the Christians in Rome.

 ▶ EXPLORE THE TEXT ◀

Honor Authorities (Rom. 13:1-7)

First-century Christians’ insistence that idols were false gods sometimes created conflict with groups that worshiped idols. Their condemnation of the immoral behavior of pagan society also could result in animosity. Local officials, normally worshipers of pagan gods themselves, often sided with the critics of the church and treated believers unjustly. How was the church to navigate these sometimes complex encounters with pagan governing authorities?

VERSE 1

Let everyone submit to the governing authorities, since there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are instituted by God.

Everyone should **submit to the governing authorities**. Paul taught that believers are citizens of heaven (Phil. 3:20). Christians reside in the present world as strangers and exiles (1 Pet. 2:11). As citizens of God's kingdom, believers are in the world but not of the world (John 17:14-18). At the same time, Paul asserted that the believers' commitment to Jesus as Lord does not mean that they are free to disregard earthly *governing authorities*. Rather, they should *submit* to them.

Christians should submit to earthly authorities because **there is no authority except from God**. God sovereignly ordained the institution of government. But a governing authority who engages in evil actions is not doing God's will. God might use their evil actions to accomplish His purposes, but God is never presented as approving of their evil.

The authorities that exist are instituted by God. The word *instituted* means bringing about order by arranging or putting things in place. God has ordained the institution of government as an alternative to chaos in a fallen world. Functioning properly, governing authorities serve as a necessary restraint on human evil, and respect for God should lead to respect for *governing authorities*.

VERSE 2

So then, the one who resists the authority is opposing God's command, and those who oppose it will bring judgment on themselves.

Since God has instituted government, anyone who **resists the authority is opposing God's command**. The word *resists* is a variation of the word *submit*. The two express well the only real options available to the church. Rome was not a democracy. Civil disobedience was treated as a form of rebellion, not an accepted means of advocating for change. Those under Roman rule only had two alternatives. They could submit or they could rebel. And Paul knew how harshly and often violently Rome dealt with rebels.

In addition to risking Rome's harsh reaction to rebellion, Paul pointed out that the person who opposes the social order instituted by God was also *opposing God's command*. God has ordained civil authorities to maintain social order. Since the authorities serve that purpose, resisting them is in effect resisting God's plan for humanity. As a result, Paul warned the church that **those who oppose** the governing authorities **will bring judgment**. Paul did not specify whether he had divine judgment or judgment by the governing authorities in mind. If the action judged (and punished) was evil, as Paul's next statement implies,

then he may have considered the civil punishment an expression of God's judgment.

VERSE 3

For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you want to be unafraid of the one in authority? Do what is good, and you will have its approval.

For introduces an additional reason for submission to governing authorities. **Rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad.** The word *rulers* takes the place of “governing authorities,” but seems to be used as a synonym, not to introduce some different kind of authority. *Terror* is the word commonly meaning fear or awe but can also describe something as fear-inspiring or intimidating.

Rulers are authorities with the responsibility to judge and assign punishments as appropriate. The person engaging in *good conduct* has no cause to fear judgment. But the person engaging in *bad* (conduct) is right to fear punishment should their conduct be brought before the authorities. Paul certainly knew that some rulers could be corrupted and punish innocent people. But Paul in the current context was not dealing with the problem of corrupt officials. His comments assume a situation in which rulers are functioning properly and justly.

Assuming a government functioning as God designed, Paul asked a rhetorical question pointing to proper behavior for believers. **Do you want to be unafraid?** uses a singular “you” to make the question more pointed and personal. The way to avoid living in fear of punishment is simply to **do what is good** so that **you** (singular) **will have** the ruler's **approval**.

VERSE 4

For it is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, because it does not carry the sword for no reason. For it is God's servant, an avenger that brings wrath on the one who does wrong.

For introduces another elaboration on the proper functioning of a ruler. The ruler in God's design is **God's servant for your good**. Rulers functioning properly as God's servants act in a way that would be acceptable to God.

The ruler functions *for your good*. *Your* is singular, maintaining the personal nature of the statement. The *good* which the ruler promotes

can be understood in several ways. Rulers may promote peace and prosperity for their subjects. By punishing evildoers, they can provide those subjects protection. Rulers can promote social harmony and allow God's people to function at liberty and in peace. Whichever *good* Paul had in mind, he was asserting that rulers should act to the benefit of the people they serve.

The ruler serves as **an avenger that brings wrath on the one who does wrong**. God's *wrath* sometimes refers to a future, eschatological judgment. But here the emphasis is on temporal, physical punishment of the wrongdoer. The *avenger* is one who executes justice to redress a wrong done to another. When wise rulers punish the same kind of evil that God condemns, they function as servants of God's wrath.

VERSE 5

Therefore, you must submit, not only because of wrath but also because of your conscience.

Godly people who do good should find comfort in the kind of just rule that makes society a safer place to live, work, and serve God. **Therefore**, believers **must submit** to the governing authorities. Paul summed up the direction he had given by highlighting two complementary reasons for submitting to the governmental authorities.

On the one hand, believers should submit **because of wrath**. Paul warned the Roman believers to submit in order to avoid incurring the *wrath* of the Roman authorities. In addition, believers should submit **because of your conscience**. The established laws of a society provide external motivations for behavior. Since God ordained the authorities that establish such laws, they should be obeyed. But the highlighting of *conscience* also recognizes the influence of a person's inner moral compass which may or may not align with external rules. The believer's conscience in particular should reflect his or her commitment to honor God. Peter, echoing the advice of Paul, also reflected this reality when he told the church that they should both "fear God" and "honor the emperor" (1 Pet. 2:17).

VERSES 6-7

And for this reason you pay taxes, since the authorities are God's servants, continually attending to these tasks. Pay your obligations to everyone: taxes to those you owe taxes, tolls to those you owe tolls, respect to those you owe respect, and honor to those you owe honor.

For this reason may link Paul’s comments back to conscience or fear of wrath specifically but probably alludes to his overall teaching that government is of God and so those served by government should submit to it, including obeying its laws and providing for its support. The authorities in this context are described as **God’s servants**, using a word normally applied to a public servant or minister.

Paul also used two different words for **taxes**. The first refers to the tribute tax. This is the tax the scribes asked Jesus about in an effort to trap Him (Luke 20:20-26). The second, the toll, was a tax on goods or services, like a customs duty or a toll for transporting goods. A form of this word was used of Matthew working at a “tax office” (Matt. 9:9) and to describe Zacchaeus as a “chief tax collector” (Luke 19:2). Both forms of tax were very unpopular, in part because Rome engaged in tax farming, a process that allowed the tax collector to enrich himself by demanding more tax than was actually due to Rome and keeping the difference.

Echoing the teaching of Jesus (Matt. 22:21) and as an expression of submission to the governing authorities, Paul told the church to **pay your obligations to everyone**. Paul then expanded his statement with a list of four obligations. *Taxes* and *tolls* were owed to the government and should be paid as an expression of submission and to support their work. **Respect** (or fear) and **honor** are broader terms pointing to the fact that Christians have obligations to acknowledge authorities beyond simply paying taxes. Paul did not name those due *respect* and *honor*, but Peter did when he told the church to “fear God” and “honor the emperor,” using the same Greek words as Paul (1 Pet. 2:17). If Paul’s briefer command carried the same intent, he too was reminding the church of their dual obligation—first to God and then to governing authorities.



Explore Further

Paul advised the Roman believers how to live as Christians under the authority of the Roman Empire. Do you think Paul’s advice would have differed in any way were he to write to the citizens of a modern western democracy? Think and pray about your role as a citizen of the United States and what it means to both honor governing authorities and fear God.

Honor Each Other (Rom. 13:8-10)

Paul used the idea of obligation to the government (v. 7) to transition to the Christian's greatest obligation—that of love. The believer is obligated to honor governing authorities, pay taxes, and behave in a godly fashion. These behaviors should arise not from a set of rules but from Christian love. Just as God has loved them, they owe a debt of love. And paying that debt should shape their behavior in a multitude of ways.

VERSE 8

Do not owe anyone anything, except to love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.

Paul urged the church, **do not owe anyone anything**. Since the obligation to pay taxes was a recurring and unavoidable reality, Paul was not prohibiting incurring obligations or borrowing and incurring debt as a whole. Jesus Himself encouraged lending to the needy, which produces borrowers obligated to repay the lender (Matt. 5:42). Paul's command, rather, urges believers to not leave debts unpaid. The Christian must not be a deadbeat, taking from others and neglecting or refusing to pay back what they owe. Rather, they should meet their obligations in whatever manner and terms they committed to when incurring the debt.

The one obligation that should never be thought of as fully paid is the obligation **to love one another**. It has no expiration date and no limit on its reach. As the most basic of Christian obligations, it should motivate and shape all Christian actions and characterize all relationships (Matt. 5:44-48; Luke 10:25-28; John 13:34-35). **The one who loves another has fulfilled the law**. Since God is a God of love, His laws must be an expression of that love. Therefore, a person acting out of godly love will act in a way that is consistent with God's commands (1 John 4:7-21).

VERSES 9-10

The commandments, Do not commit adultery; do not murder; do not steal; do not covet; and any other commandment, are summed up by this commandment: Love your neighbor as yourself. Love does no wrong to a neighbor. Love, therefore, is the fulfillment of the law.

Paul explained his argument by citing four of the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:13-17), which all focus on relationships with other people. Why does love fulfill these commands? Because love by its nature

prevents the harm these laws prohibit. Paul continued by asserting that **any other commandment** also rests on the foundation of love for others. God's intent for His people was never that they merely abide by a list of rules, but more basically that their behavior honor and reflect His character. Just as God is love, He intends that His people love others even as He loves them. Thus, all of God's commands can be **summed up** as expressions of the basic command, **Love your neighbor as yourself** (Lev. 19:18; Matt. 22:37-40).

Paul explained his teaching further by observing that **love does no wrong to a neighbor**. The word *wrong* can refer to evil, depravity, or injury. True love is self-sacrificing (John 15:13). Christlike love is not driven by self-interest and refuses to harm others for its own benefit. As a result, a person whose actions are motivated by love will naturally fulfill the law not as an exercise in legalism but because he or she values others and genuinely wants the best for them.



Explore Further

Read "Love" on pages 1031-1032 and "Brotherly Love" on page 239 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*.

How would you explain the difference between actions in compliance

- with a law and the same actions as an expression of love?

Honor Christ (Rom. 13:11-14)

Believers should submit to governing authorities as an expression of their love for and obedience to God (vv. 1-7). They also should treat others as the love of God dictates (vv. 8-10). In addition to these two truths, Paul reminded his readers of a third truth that should guide Christian behavior. Their lives must not reflect the darkness of this fallen world but the true light of God. And since they know that God will one day judge the world, Christians should live in light of that day.

VERSE 11

Besides this, since you know the time, it is already the hour for you to wake up from sleep, because now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed.

Besides this connects what follows to what came before. Believers must submit and must love, but in addition, they must **wake up from sleep**. The writers of the New Testament often used *sleep*, “night,” and “darkness” as images of the moral blindness of the lost. Those who deny their own sin and are unwilling to acknowledge God’s truth move through life like people stumbling about in total darkness.

Followers of Jesus **know the time** in which they live. And as a result, they should *wake up* and no longer live like those who have not seen the light. Living in the light of the gospel also means knowing that one day God will deliver His people and judge the world. The believers were told this when they **first believed**. And since time has passed, **our salvation is nearer** than it was before. *Salvation* is used in the New Testament of a person’s conversion, as in *when we first believed*. But salvation can also refer to the final transformation of a person in the future (1 Pet. 1:5). And believers’ certain knowledge of God’s future judgment of all and deliverance of His children should shape the way they live as they anticipate the coming day of the Lord (1 Thess. 5:1-11).

VERSE 12

The night is nearly over, and the day is near; so let us discard the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light.

The **night**, the present age of spiritual darkness, **is nearly over**. The **day**, the future age inaugurated by the coming of the Lord, **is near**. Paul’s words were intended to encourage hope and provide a sense of urgency, not provide a time frame for the Lord’s return. God alone knows the time of Jesus’s coming (Mark 13:32). But while Christians cannot predict the time of the event, they are expected to prepare for its certain arrival.

Believers are to prepare for the coming of the day of the Lord in two related ways. Believers should **discard the deeds of darkness**. Actions typical of unbelievers should no longer be part of the Christian’s behavior. On the other hand, those who serve God should **put on the armor of light**. Paul used “put off” and “put on” terminology to describe changes that were visible, like clothing, but not to imply that Christian character was shallow or as changeable as a garment (Col. 3:8-10; Eph. 4:22-24).

The term translated *armor* can refer to any object taken up to prepare for a conflict, including a weapon (John 18:3; 2 Cor. 6:7; 10:4). Since Paul described it as something to *put on*, he likely had armor in mind. The Christian struggle against spiritual evil using similar imagery is described more fully in the letter to the Ephesians using the same word for *put on*, but a different word for “full armor” (Eph. 6:10-20).

VERSES 13-14

Let us walk with decency, as in the daytime: not in carousing and drunkenness; not in sexual impurity and promiscuity; not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh to gratify its desires.

Clad in “the armor of light” (v. 12), Paul described the Christian experience as standing firm (Eph. 6:11,13,14). Believers stand firm in the knowledge that God will win the victory. Confident of certain victory, believers are to **walk with decency** and **put on the Lord Jesus Christ**. To *walk in decency* or “behave decently” (NIV) means to live in a way that is proper or appropriate by God’s standards, not the world’s.

The command to *put on the Lord Jesus Christ* points to the same kind of life fully reflecting one’s Christian commitment. *Put on* repeats the same word used of putting on the “armor of light.” While it certainly means to embrace the teachings and character of Christ, it also implies a close union between the believer and his or her Lord.

The opposite to walking in the light, putting on the armor of light, and putting on Jesus is living in the darkness and making **provision for the flesh to gratify its desires**. The *flesh* for Paul often refers not so much to physical form as it does to life focused on material existence and not on God. Those who live uninterested in spiritual things and alien to God focus on gratifying fleshly, earthly desires, and all sorts of ungodly behavior results (Rom. 1:18-32).

Followers of Jesus should *make no provision* for such actions as **carousing, drunkenness, sexual impurity, promiscuity, quarreling, and jealousy**, which typified their former fleshly lives. *Provision* implies forethought or careful planning. So believers must intentionally guard against falling back into such behavior.

Explore Further

Read “Darkness” on page 390 and “Light, Light of the World” on pages 1017–1018 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What “deeds of darkness” should you “discard,” and

- how is your life different when wearing “the armor of light”?
