

AUTHORITY: BELONGING TO GOD

The weekly meetings at their small business were usually thirty minutes, often covering the same topics. Brenda considered the meetings pretty dry. But today was different: her manager had been asked to discuss office etiquette.

“Our company does not permit fresh flowers and strong perfumes.” Clara looked directly at Brenda. “Like many of you, I love the fresh flowers from my garden. But we don’t permit them in the building, because some workers have allergies. The same goes for wearing strong perfumes and colognes. Something *we* love can cause issues for others.”

Brenda left the meeting feeling hurt that she could no longer bring her tulips to work. She felt singled out too. Whenever tulips were in season, she made sure that her cubicle had a vase of fresh purple ones. They were planted by her son, who died in an accident a few years earlier. She made her way to Clara’s office, hoping to make one final appeal to keep her flowers.

“Brenda,” Clara placed a hand on her shoulder. “I didn’t even know the significance of those flowers, but I have other employees who are allergic. I hope you understand.”

Brenda did, but she still felt hurt. That evening, she took her tulips home.

1 What is an example of a rule or principle that you find difficult to follow?

2 Who are some of the authority figures in your life?

3 Which is harder, following Christian or non-Christian leaders? Or is there no difference?

¹⁷ And Jesus answering said unto them, Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's. And they marvelled at him.

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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.

⁶ 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.

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

¹⁷ Then Jesus said to them, "Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's."

And they were amazed at him.

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¹ 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.

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.

God Before Government

Mark 12:17 is the climax of a "conflict" story. These describe encounters between Jesus and the religious leaders, who pose questions designed to stump and discredit Him in the eyes of the people. In Mark 12:13, the Pharisees and the Herodians (supporters of Herod and his family) approach Jesus to flatter Him (v. 14). After trying to butter Him up, they ask their question: "Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?" (v. 14).

This is a highly charged question in first-century Judea. The "imperial tax" was paid only by subjects of the Roman empire. Paying represented submission to the emperor. If Jesus advocates paying, it would make Him look sympathetic to oppressive authorities. The Pharisees hope to cast doubt on Jesus' status as a potential king and

deliverer of Israel. But if He objects to the tax, the Herodians will label Him a rebel who advocates disloyalty to the empire.

Jesus recognizes the trap and asks them for a coin (v. 15). Roman coins had the relief of an important political figure, along with an inscription. Coins at the time would read “Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus.” The Pharisees and Herodians acknowledge that the coin has Caesar’s image and name on it, to which Jesus responds, “Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s” (v. 17).

The response may seem like mere deflection. But the answer reflects a deep insight about how believers should relate to their governments. Roman propaganda claimed that the emperor descended from the gods, that submission was obedience to the gods. But Jesus implies a hierarchy. There are things that His followers owe to earthly rulers, but their ultimate allegiance is to the God of Israel. Where duties to God conflict with the emperor’s will, one must follow God.

Jesus’ teaching provides a context for Romans 13:1–8. Paul encourages believers to submit to authorities; they have been “established by God” (v. 1). This does not endorse every politician’s actions, but it acknowledges that God is really in charge. God instituted civil authorities, which is why they are “God’s servants” (v. 6)—whether they realize it or not. Paul follows Jesus’ lead, challenging Roman propaganda. Paul says that they are merely servants of the God of Israel, working at His pleasure and for His good purpose. Believers are, therefore, free to pay taxes without being disloyal to God (v. 6).

In verses 7–8, Paul restates and expands upon Jesus’ principle. God established duties between human beings, whether paying taxes or showing honor (v. 7). The believer must respect and fulfill these duties. Paul adds that only one “debt” is never set aside: the debt of love to one another (v. 8).

1 Why is a question about paying taxes a trap for Jesus?

2 How does Jesus’ response stun His opponents?

3 Do government authorities have absolute power? Why or why not?

¹³ Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake: whether it be to the king, as supreme; ¹⁴ Or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well. ¹⁵ For so is the will of God, that with well doing ye may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men: ¹⁶ As free, and not using your liberty for a cloke of maliciousness, but as the servants of God. ¹⁷ Honour all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the king.

¹³ Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, ¹⁴ or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. ¹⁵ For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people. ¹⁶ Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as God's slaves. ¹⁷ Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honor the emperor.

Exiles in the World

Peter addresses his letter to “God's elect, exiles scattered throughout the provinces” (1:1). The word translated “exile” refers to someone traveling in a foreign land (Heb. 11:13; 1 Peter 2:11). But Peter is using this word as a metaphor for his readers' spiritual position: followers of Christ in the world. This world and its political systems are not their true home.

Peter prepares his audience to live as “foreigners” in the world. On the one hand, they must protect their spiritual selves by resisting sexual temptations that “wage war against” their souls (1 Peter 2:11). On the other hand, they must walk in holiness for the benefit of others. In verse 12, Peter urges them to “live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day He visits us” (v. 12). This echoes Jesus' command to “let your light shine before others” (Matt. 5:16), casting the pursuit of holiness as a missionary project. Though others may slander, obedience to God will lead them to recognize God's reign over all the earth.

It is in this context that Peter turns to the subject of how believers should relate to earthly rulers. In verse 13, Peter exhorts his

audience, “Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every human authority.” Authorities include “the emperor” and also “governors, who . . . punish those who do wrong and . . . commend those who do right” (v. 14).

Paul emphasized that God established authorities to enact justice (Rom. 13:3–4). Yet both apostles know that Roman authorities frequently fail at the task. Paul was unlawfully imprisoned at their hands (Acts 16:38), and the Roman emperor Nero is thought to have executed both Paul and Peter for their devotion to Christ. Peter agrees with the general principle that one should obey the governing authorities because God wants them to bring justice. It allows that disobedience may be necessary when the wishes of civil authorities conflict with God’s.

Peter offers an additional reason for obedience: God wants them to “silence the ignorant talk of foolish people” by “doing good” (v. 15). The “ignorant talk” includes false accusations against Christ’s followers. The “good” that Peter expects may be mere obedience to the law, or it could also mean public acts of charity. It suggests that generosity and commitment to public good will show others that prejudices against Christ’s followers are unfounded.

Peter states the underlying principle that should govern these actions (vv. 16–17). Believers should live as people whom Christ has set free, using freedom to serve God rather than sinful desires (compare Gal. 5:13). They owe “respect” to everyone and “love” to fellow believers. They owe honor to the emperor, but reverence to God (v. 17).

1 Why does Peter address his audience as exiles and foreigners?

2 Why does Peter encourage living holy lives?

3 What reason does Peter give for obeying the authorities?

Earthly Authority Is from God

We tend to balk at the word *authority*. In a world that prizes individualism and autonomy, it feels better to defend *freedom*. We have freedom to choose our path, our friends, the person we want to marry—almost anything.

Yet within the freedoms that we enjoy, there are limits, right? If we waltz into work on Monday and decide to scream at our boss, there would probably be dramatic consequences. If we allow ourselves to stretch the truth when we do our taxes, exaggerating deductions or fudging the math, we face the prospect of a painful audit. If we choose the wrong company of friends—people who only encourage our worst habits—we might become a gossiping, cruder version of ourself.

I think of the challenging words of Jesus in Matthew 16:24–27. He encourages us to find abundant life, *not* by clinging to our will and our desires, but through surrender: laying down our lives to find what it means to live. The way of the cross requires surrender.

There is for each of us a chain of duty: first to God and second to earthly authorities. While this probably is less common than in Paul and Peter's day, an earthly authority who asks us to go against God's will does not need to be obeyed. But for civil disobedience to be a credible witness, we must follow the other instructions in the same context: submit to earthly authorities, as a habit. It means that we follow the laws of civil government, we respect and honor the role of leaders, and we must seek to use our freedom for good. If we walk this path, we elevate the name of Christ.

1 What laws do you wish would change?

2 What are some good examples of civil disobedience (when just following the law would have been unjust)?

3 How do you show your primary allegiance to God?

Practice for Tax Day

As citizens of the kingdom and exiles in this world, we are taught to respect the laws of civil government. It just so happens that the deadline to file taxes is this week in the US. Whether you have already filed or not, you probably have never thought of this as an invitation to prayer and self-examination! What would it be like to say the words below?

Father, I hold before You a record of my taxes, calculated accurately and paid in full. Somehow it reminds me that my first allegiance is to You and the glory of Your name.

Key Text

And Jesus answering said unto them, Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's. And they marvelled at him. —Mark 12:17 KJV

Then Jesus said to them, "Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's. And they were amazed at him."

—Mark 12:17 NIV

Quiet Hour® and Cross Daily Bible Readings

Week of April 13 through April 18

- Mon.** Psalm 127—A Heritage from the Lord.
- Tue.** Proverbs 2:1–6—My Child, Be Eager to Learn.
- Wed.** Matthew 18:7–14—Do Not Despise the Little Ones.
- Thu.** Colossians 3:20–25—Obedience That Is Acceptable Before God.
- Fri.** Matthew 21:8–9, 15–17—Praise from Infants.
- Sat.** Proverbs 20:7–12—Good Deeds of Children.

Next Week: Mark 9:36–37, 42; 10:13–16

We will discuss the meaning of childlike faith. Who are the children for whom you need to pray this week?