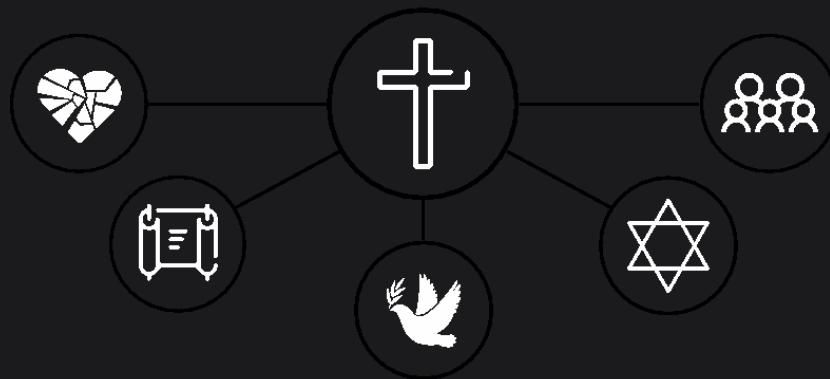




ROMANS AND THE FUTURE GOSPEL

ROMANS 1-7



Title: Romans and the Future Gospel

Text: Romans 13:1-7

Date: June 18, 2023

Main Idea: God has ordained the authorities in this world; because He has all sovereignty over them, we can obey the authorities over us, trusting that God is over them and working through them for His greater purpose.

Personal Study Guide

READ ROMANS 13:1-7

Highlight – What stands out?

1. First of all, what is the “30,000-foot view” of this passage? What main idea is Paul trying to get across?
2. What questions came up for you as you read the passage?
3. What positive things does he say about those in authority?
4. What positive and negative things does he say about those who are *under* authority?

Explain – What does this mean?

Tip for Lecture Style: As you write your lesson, you can summarize these details and explain them in your lesson to your class.

Tip for Discussion Based: Read the verses and either explain to move into the discussion of application, or spend some time in discovery as a class.

1. Read back through Romans 12:9-21. What responsibilities did Paul lay upon believers in that passage?

2. What responsibility does Paul lay upon believers in Romans 13:1? What reasoning does he give for doing so? And what awaits those who resist?

3. But must we always obey our authorities? What about when they are wrong? Jen Wilkin said (on *Knowing Faith* episode #144) that “we tend to run to the exception and ignore the rule” when it comes to being subject to the authorities over us. Which leaves us with a big question: when should we be “subject to the governing authorities” (v1) and when must we act against them in civil disobedience? Let’s look at some right responses of civil disobedience in the Bible:

<i>Passage</i>	<i>Why do the people disobey?</i>	<i>How do they disobey?</i>
<i>Exodus 1:15-20</i>		
<i>Daniel 6:6-17</i>		
<i>Esther 4:4-17</i>		
<i>Acts 5:17-32</i>		

4. What themes do we see in these *right* acts of civil disobedience?

5. What, then, according to verses 3-4 is our responsibility? Read Romans 12:19. How does this verse encourage us in our responsibility before our authorities?

6. What is the main idea in verses 6-7? Where else do we see this idea of paying what is due in the Bible?

7. Think about the context of the Roman authorities. What do you know about them? How does this land reading Paul's words knowing what we know about life in Rome at that time?

Apply – How does this change me?

1. In verse 1, Paul says that “every person” should “be subject to the governing authorities.” The Greek word, according to the John MacArthur Study Bible, “was used of a soldier’s absolute obedience to his superior officer.” When it comes to obeying your authorities, where do you fall short of absolute obedience (excluding, of course, where those authorities would lead you to sin against God)?

2. Reread Romans 13:4 and then Romans 12:9, 17, and 21. Discuss how these passages affect the way you think about being under the authorities that God has put over you.

3. Reread 13:7. Do you struggle with showing honor and respect depending on who's in power? How should reading this verse affect your thoughts toward those in power you disagree with?

Respond – What's my next step?

1. Think back on the biblical incidents of civil disobedience we looked at. What political/government issues might you be holding too closely? Pray for wisdom about being subject to the government in places where you don't agree but that don't rise to a biblical call for disobedience.

2. John Stott wrote in his Romans commentary that the people "who serve the state as legislators, civil servants, magistrates, police, social workers or tax-collectors are just as much 'ministers of God' as those who serve the church as pastors, teachers, evangelists or administrators." Are you in the habit of praying for your civil authorities? What plan can you make to pray for them on some kind of regular rotation?

Commentary: Taken from John Stott's commentary on Romans 13:1-7

Note to Group Leaders: You also have your F.F. Bruce Commentary on Romans you were given on Team Night. You can use that one, in addition to this one, to help you grasp the text. Reach out to Courtney Reissig if you need one or haven't received yours.

21. Our relationship to the state: conscientious citizenship

13:1-7

In Romans 12 Paul has developed our four basic Christian relationships, namely to God (1-2), to ourselves (3-8), to one another (9-16) and to our enemies (17-21). In Romans 13 he develops three more—to the state (conscientious citizenship, 1-7), to the law (neighbour-love as its fulfilment, 8-10), and to the day of the Lord's return (living in the 'already' and the 'not yet', 11-14).

Before we go any further, however, we need to consider a debate which has divided theologians throughout this century. It concerns the identity of the *authorities* (*exousiai*) of verse 1. It has been argued by some (beginning, it seems, with Martin Dibelius in 1909) that there is in *exousiai* a double reference, namely to the civil powers on the one hand and to cosmic forces on the other, which stand behind them and work through them. The chief protagonist of this view has been Oscar Cullmann, whose case may be summarized as follows. First, Paul undoubtedly believed in, and frequently referred to, superhuman intelligences whom he names 'principalities', 'powers', 'rulers' and 'authorities'. So these are the 'authorities' of Romans 13:1. Having been conquered and tamed by Christ, they have now 'lost their evil character', and they 'stand under and within the lordship of Christ'.¹ Secondly, it is 'certain', Cullmann writes, that in 1 Corinthians 2:8 'the rulers of this age', who if they had known God's wisdom 'would not have crucified the Lord of glory', were both 'these invisible forces and powers' and at the same time their 'effective agents, namely, the earthly rulers, the Roman administrators of Palestine'.² Thirdly, if we come without prejudice to Romans 13, 'it is by far the most natural thing to give to the plural *exousiai* no other sense than that which it always has for Paul, that is, the

¹ Cullmann (1962), p. 196.

² Cullmann (1957), p. 63.

meaning of “angelic powers”’, although he was also plainly writing of the state ‘as the executive agent of angelic powers’.³ Indeed, these expressions (‘authorities’ and ‘powers’) were deliberately chosen, Cullmann believed, in order to make clear ‘the combined meaning’.⁴

The majority of scholars have not been persuaded by these arguments, however. Three main obstacles stand in the way. First, although Paul clearly believed in cosmic principalities and powers, and although he wrote of their overthrow at the cross, he also wrote of their continuing opposition to God and his people.⁵ The New Testament ‘affords no evidence in support of the contention that hostile spiritual powers were re-commissioned, after being subdued, to a positive service of Christ’.⁶ Secondly, 1 Corinthians 2:8 cannot bear the weight Cullmann puts on it. ‘Nowhere else does the New Testament attribute the *crucifixion* to angelic beings’;⁷ it is always attributed to human rulers. Thirdly, the meaning of *exousiai* in Romans 13 must be determined in the end by its context, and not by its very different use elsewhere. Here we are required to submit to these ‘authorities’. But nowhere else are Christian believers said to be under the principalities and powers. On the contrary, they are now under us because we are in Christ and they are under him.⁸ We conclude, therefore, that the phrase ‘the governing authorities’ in Romans 13:1 refers to the state, together with its official representatives.

Relations between church and state have been notoriously controversial throughout the Christian centuries. To oversimplify, four main models have been tried—Erastianism (the state controls the church), theocracy (the church controls the state), Constantinianism (the compromise in which the state favours the church and the church accommodates to the state in order to retain its favour), and partnership (church and state recognize and encourage each other’s distinct God-given responsibilities in a spirit of constructive collaboration). The fourth seems to accord best with Paul’s teaching in Romans 13.

That church and state have different roles, and that Christians have duties to both God and the state was clearly implied in Jesus’ enigmatic epigram, ‘Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.’⁹ Now Paul enlarges on the state’s God-appointed role and on the role of Christian people in relation to it, although his emphasis is on personal citizenship rather than on any particular theory of church—state relations. What he writes is specially remarkable when we recall that at that time there were no Christian

³ Cullmann (1962), pp. 194f.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 196.

⁵ Eph. 6:11f; *cf.* Rom. 8:37ff.

⁶ Cranfield, vol. II, p. 658.

⁷ Murray, vol. II, p. 254.

⁸ Eph. 1:20ff.; 2:4ff.; 1 Pet. 3:22.

⁹ Mk. 12:17.

authorities (global, regional or local). On the contrary, they were Roman or Jewish, and were therefore largely unfriendly and even hostile to the church. Yet Paul regarded them as having been established by God, who required Christians to submit to them and cooperate with them. He had inherited a long-standing tradition from the Old Testament that Yahweh is sovereign over human kingdoms 'and gives them to anyone he wishes',¹⁰ and that by his wisdom 'kings reign ... and princes govern'.¹¹

It is conceivable that Paul was responding to those 'constant disturbances', as a result of which the Emperor Claudius had 'ordered all the Jews to leave Rome',¹² and which Suetonius said in his *Life of Claudius*¹³ had happened 'at the instigation of Chrestus'. We lack information about the causes of this unrest. Did some Roman Christians regard submission to Rome as incompatible with the lordship of Christ or their freedom in Christ? It seems idle to speculate.

1. The authority of the state (1-3)

Paul begins with a clear command of universal application: *Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities* (1a). He then goes on to give the reason for this requirement. It is that the state's authority is derived from God, and this he affirms three times.

1. *There is no authority except that which God has established* (1b).

2. *The authorities that exist have been established by God* (1c).

3. *Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted* (2a).

Thus the state is a divine institution with divine authority. Christians are not anarchists or subversives.

We need to be cautious, however, in our interpretation of Paul's statements. He cannot be taken to mean that all the Caligulas, Herods, Neros and Domitians of New Testament times, and all the Hitlers, Stalins, Amins and Saddams of our times, were personally appointed by God, that God is responsible for their behaviour, or that their authority is in no circumstances to be resisted. Paul means rather that all human authority is derived from God's authority, so that we can say to rulers what Jesus said to Pilate, 'You would have no power [*exousia*, authority] over me if it were not given to you from above.'¹⁴ Pilate misused his authority to condemn Jesus; nevertheless, the authority he used to do this had been delegated to him by God.

¹⁰ Dn. 4:17, 25, 32.

¹¹ Pr. 8:15f.

¹² Acts 18:2.

¹³ Suetonius, 25.4.

¹⁴ Jn. 19:11. The book of Proverbs contains several references to the existence of wicked rulers (e.g. 28:3, 12, 15, 16, 28), even though it affirms that it is by Wisdom that kings reign (Pr. 8:15).

Having called for submission, Paul now warns against rebellion, since rebels are not only setting themselves *against what God has instituted* (2a), but in addition *will bring judgment on themselves* (2b). In consequence, it is both right and wise to submit. Paul elaborates the wisdom of it. *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 he will commend you* (3). The statement that rulers commend *those who do right* and punish *those who do wrong* is not of course invariably true, as Paul knew perfectly well. Although he had himself experienced from procurators and centurions the benefits of Roman justice, he also knew about the miscarriage of justice in the condemnation of Jesus. And if all provincial courts were just, he would not have needed to appeal to Caesar.¹⁵ So, in depicting rulers in such a good light, as commending the right and opposing the wrong, he is stating the divine ideal, not the human reality.

Yet the requirement of submission and the warning of rebellion are couched in universal terms. For this reason they have constantly been misapplied by oppressive right-wing regimes, as if Scripture gave rulers *carte blanche* to develop a tyranny and to demand unconditional obedience. Commenting on verse 2 (*he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted*), Oscar Cullmann has written: 'Few sayings in the New Testament have suffered as much misuse as this one. As soon as Christians, out of loyalty to the gospel of Jesus, offer resistance to a State's totalitarian claim, the representatives of that State, or their collaborationist theological advisers, are accustomed to appeal to this saying of Paul, as if Christians are here commanded to endorse and thus to abet all the crimes of a totalitarian State.'¹⁶ But, as the context shows, 'there can be no question here of an unconditional and uncritical subjection to any and every demand of the State'.¹⁷

As an example of the misuse of Romans 13 I refer to an experience of Michael Cassidy, founder of African Enterprise. On 8 October 1985 he was granted an interview with President P. W. Botha in Pretoria. It was the time of the National Initiative for Reconciliation, and Michael had hoped for signs of repentance and for the assurance that apartheid would be dismantled. He was to be bitterly disappointed. This is his account of what happened: 'I was immediately aware on entry to the room that this was not to be the sort of encounter for which I had prayed. The President began by standing to read me part of Romans 13!' He evidently imagined that this passage was enough to justify unequivocal support of the Nationalist Government's apartheid policy.¹⁸

¹⁵ Acts 25:11.

¹⁶ Cullmann (1957), pp. 55f.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

¹⁸ Michael Cassidy, *The Passing Summer, A South African Pilgrimage in the Politics of Love* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1989), pp. 298f.

How, then, can it be shown that Paul's demand for submission is not absolute? Granted that the authority of rulers is derived from God, what happens if they abuse it, if they reverse their God-given duty, commending those who do evil and punishing those who do good? Does the requirement to submit still stand in such a morally perverse situation? No. The principle is clear. We are to submit right up to the point where obedience to the state would entail disobedience to God. But if the state commands what God forbids, or forbids what God commands, then our plain Christian duty is to resist, not to submit, to disobey the state in order to obey God. As Peter and the other apostles put it to the Sanhedrin: 'We must obey God rather than men!'¹⁹ This is the strict meaning of civil disobedience, namely disobeying a particular human law because it is contrary to God's law. To trespass and organize a sit-in, or to obstruct the police in their duties, may also in some circumstances be justified, but it should be called 'civil protest' rather than 'civil disobedience', since in this case the laws which are being broken in order to publicize the protest are not themselves intrinsically evil.

Whenever laws are enacted which contradict God's law, civil disobedience becomes a Christian duty. There are notable examples of it in Scripture. When Pharaoh ordered the Hebrew midwives to kill the newborn boys, they refused to obey. 'The midwives ... feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live.'²⁰ When King Nebuchadnezzar issued an edict that all his subjects must fall down and worship his golden image, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refused to obey.²¹ When King Darius made a decree that for thirty days nobody should pray 'to any god or man' except himself, Daniel refused to obey.²² And when the Sanhedrin banned preaching in the name of Jesus, the apostles refused to obey.²³ All these were heroic refusals, in spite of the threats which accompanied the edicts. In each case civil disobedience involved great personal risk, including possible loss of life. In each case its purpose was 'to demonstrate their submissiveness to God, not their defiance of government.'²⁴

I now cite a moving modern example. In 1957 Hendrik Verwoerd, as Minister of Native Affairs the year before he became Prime Minister of South Africa, announced the Native Laws Amendment Bill. Its 'church clause' would have prevented any racial association in 'church, school, hospital, club or any other institution or place of entertainment'. The Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town at the time was a gentle scholar called Geoffrey Clayton. He decided with his

¹⁹ Acts 5:29.

²⁰ Ex. 1:17.

²¹ Dn. 3.

²² Dn. 6.

²³ Acts 4:18ff.

²⁴ Charles W. Colson, *Kingdoms in Conflict, An Insider's Challenging View of Politics, Power and the Pulpit* (William Morrow/Zondervan, 1987), p. 251.

bishops, although with reluctance and apprehension, that they must disobey. He wrote to the Prime Minister that, if the Bill were to become law, he would be 'unable to obey it or to counsel our clergy and people to do so'. The following morning he died, perhaps under the pain and strain of civil disobedience.

Further light is thrown on the ambivalent nature of the state's authority when Romans 13 is compared with Revelation 13. Some thirty years have elapsed since Romans was written, and the systematic persecution of Christians has begun under the Emperor Domitian. Now the state is no longer seen as the servant of God, wielding his authority, but as the ally of the devil (pictured as a red dragon), who has given his authority to the persecuting state (pictured as a monster emerging out of the sea). Thus Revelation 13 is a satanic parody of Romans 13. Yet both are true. 'According as the State remains within its limits or transgresses them, the Christian will describe it as the Servant of God or as the instrument of the Devil.'²⁵

To sum up, we are to submit to the state's God-given authority, but it has been given for particular and not totalitarian purposes. 'The gospel is equally hostile to tyranny and anarchy.'²⁶

2. The ministry of the state (4–7)

Paul makes it clear that the state's authority is with a view to its ministry. Indeed, just as he has affirmed three times that the state has authority from God, so now he affirms three times that it has a ministry from God.

1. *For he is God's servant to do you good (4a).*
2. *He is God's servant, an agent of wrath, to bring punishment ... (4c).*
3. *The authorities are God's servants ... (6).*

These are significant statements. If we are seeking to develop a balanced biblical understanding of the state, central to it will be the truths that the state's authority and ministry are both given to it by God. Moreover, in writing about the ministry of the state, Paul twice uses the very same word which he has used elsewhere of the ministers of the church, namely *diakonoi* (although the third time he uses *leitourgoi*, a term which usually meant 'priests' but could mean 'public servants'). We have already had occasion to note, when considering the gifts of the Spirit, that *diakonia* is a generic term which can embrace a wide variety of ministries. Those who serve the state as legislators, civil servants, magistrates, police, social workers or tax-collectors are just as much 'ministers of God' as those who serve the church as pastors, teachers, evangelists or administrators.

What, then, is the ministry which God has entrusted to the state? It is concerned with good and evil, which is a recurring theme throughout Romans 12 and 13. Paul has already told us to detest what is evil and cling to what is

²⁵ Cullmann (1957), p. 86.

²⁶ Hodge, p. 415.

good (12:9), to repay no-one evil for evil but rather to do public good (12:17), and not to be overcome with evil but to overcome evil with good (12:21). Now he depicts the role of the state in relation to good and evil. On the one hand, *do what is right (to agathon, 'good') and he will commend you (3b)*, that is, you will have his approval. *For he is God's servant to do you good (4a, to agathon again)*. On the other hand, *if you do wrong (to kakon, 'evil'), be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer (the one who practises to kakon, 'evil', 4b)*.

Here, then, are the complementary ministries of the state and its accredited representatives. 'He is God's servant to do you good' (4a) and 'he is God's servant ... to bring punishment on the evildoer' (4b). The same dual role is expressed in Peter's first letter, that 'governors ... are sent by him [sc. the Emperor] to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right'.²⁷ Thus the state's functions are to promote and reward the good, and to restrain and punish the evil.

The restraint and punishment of evil are universally recognized as primary responsibilities of the state. Indeed (5), *it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment (literally, 'on account of God's wrath', i.e. in order to avoid it) but also because of conscience (i.e. from a conscientious recognition of the state's God-given role)*. The apostle says nothing about what kind of sanctions and penalties the state may employ, but he would almost certainly have endorsed the principle of using 'minimum necessary force' in order to arrest criminals and bring them to justice. He also writes that the judge *does not bear the sword for nothing (4)*. Since the word for 'sword' (*machaira*) has occurred earlier in the letter to indicate death (8:35), and since it was used of execution,²⁸ it seems clear that Paul means it here as a symbol of capital punishment. 'The sword was carried habitually, if not by, then before the higher magistrates, and symbolized the power of life and death which they had in their hands.'²⁹ God had justified this to Noah as affirming the unique value of the life of his image-bearers.³⁰ The taking of human life in murder is such a heinous offence that it deserves the forfeiture of the murderer's life. Yet this does not seem to have been mandatory, since God himself protected Cain, the first murderer, from being killed.³¹ Because of its finality, the risk of an innocent person being executed in error, and the termination of the opportunity to respond to the gospel, many Christians believe that, at least whenever there are mitigating circumstances or any

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²⁷ 1 Pet. 2:14.

²⁸ E.g. Acts 12:2; Rev. 13:10.

²⁹ Denney, p. 697.

³⁰ Gn. 9:6.

³¹ Gn. 4:13ff.

uncertainty, the death penalty should be commuted to a life sentence. Yet I think the state should retain its right to use 'the sword', in order to bear witness both to its solemn God-given authority and to the unique sanctity of human life.

When the state punishes evildoers, it is functioning as 'the servant of God to execute his wrath' upon them (4, RSV). This expression is surely a deliberate allusion to the command in the previous chapter that we should not take revenge but 'leave room for God's wrath' (12:19), since justice belongs to him and he will punish evil. Now Paul explains one of the main ways in which he does so. God's wrath, which one day will fall on the impenitent (2:5), and is now seen in the breakdown of the social order (1:18ff.), also operates through the processes of law enforcement and the administration of justice. It is important to hold Romans 12:19 and 13:4 together. We human beings as private individuals are not authorized to take the law into our own hands and punish offenders. The punishment of evil is God's prerogative, and during the present age he exercises it through the lawcourts.

In this distinction between the role of the state and that of the individual, we may perhaps say that individuals are to live according to love rather than justice, whereas the state operates according to justice rather than love. This is by no means a wholly satisfactory formula, however, since it sets love and justice over against each other as if they are opposites and alternatives, whereas they do not exclude each other. Even in loving and serving our enemies, we should still be concerned for justice,³² and also remember that love seeks justice for the oppressed. And even in pronouncing sentence, judges should allow justice to be tempered by love, that is, mercy. For evil is not only to be punished; it is to be overcome (12:21).

The role of the state is not only to punish evil, however; it is also to promote and reward goodness. This was certainly the case in Paul's day. Dr Bruce Winter has shown that from the fifth century BC to the second century AD there was a 'long-established tradition', well evidenced from both inscriptions and literary sources, 'which guaranteed that benefactors would be publicly praised' and appropriately rewarded. He also shows that Paul's very words about 'doing good' in verses 3–4 occur in inscriptions relating to a public benefaction.³³

Yet this positive function of the state is much neglected today. The state tends to be better at punishing than at rewarding, better at enforcing the law than at fostering virtue and service. At the same time, although this is a controversial area, most governments acknowledge that they have a responsibility to preserve their society's values (not least through their educational system) and to encourage citizens to share in their welfare

RSV The Revised Standard Version of the Bible (NT, 1946; second edition, 1971; OT, 1952).

³² 1 Pet. 2:23.

³³ Bruce W. Winter, 'The Public Honouring of Christian Benefactors', in *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 34 (1988), p. 93.

programme by voluntary service. Most countries also have some arrangement for recognizing those of their citizens who have made a conspicuous contribution to the public good. They give them a citation or a certificate, a title, a decoration or some other token of appreciation. But they could probably improve and extend their award system, so that only outstanding merit is rewarded, and their honours become increasingly prized and coveted, like the international Nobel and Templeton awards. Perhaps citizens should be given stronger encouragement to recommend people from their community for public recognition.

Paul concludes his section on the state with a reference to the raising and paying of taxes. Taxation was widespread and varied in the ancient world, including a poll tax, land taxes, royalties on farm produce, and duty on imports and exports. Paul regarded this topic as coming under the rubric of the ministry of the state. *This is also why you pay taxes: it is because the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing* (6), literally 'to this very thing', which in the context seems to mean not just tax-collecting but the service of God in public life. Political parties of the Right and the Left differ over the desirable size of the state's role in the nation's life, and whether it should increase or decrease taxation. All agree, however, that there are some services which the state must provide, that these have to be paid for, and that this makes taxes necessary. So Christians should accept their tax liability with good grace, paying their dues in full, both national and local, direct and indirect, and also giving proper esteem to the officials who collect and apply them. *Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honour, then honour* (7).

Paul gives us in these verses a very positive concept of the state. In consequence Christians, who recognize that the state's authority and ministry come from God, will do more than tolerate it as if it were a necessary evil. Conscientious Christian citizens will submit to its authority, honour its representatives, pay its taxes and pray for its welfare.³⁴ They will also encourage the state to fulfil its God-appointed role and, in so far as they have opportunity, actively participate in its work.¹

³⁴ See Je. 29:7; 1 Tim. 2:1ff.

¹ John R. W. Stott, [*The Message of Romans: God's Good News for the World*](#), The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 338–347.

Additional Resources:

Podcast: [Knowing Faith: Romans 13](#)

Sermon: [Romans 13:1-7 - The Christian and the Government](#) - Both the sermon and the accompanying notes on 13:1-7 are helpful.