

Chapter 13

Every now and then I think about something I wrote and can see how it must come across in new contexts. When I wrote this chapter, I was thinking about the Jesus-followers in Rome in the middle of the sixth decade of the first century. If I'd known that it might be taken as a general statement about attitudes to political power, for all times and in all places, then I might have expressed myself a little differently.

It's important to remember that less than twenty years before I wrote, the Jewish Jesus-followers had been involved in the disturbances that had led to all the Jews, including the ones who believed in King Jesus, being thrown out of Rome on the emperor's orders. These things were still fresh in everyone's memory because some of the issues about property and leadership were still being sorted now that the Roman Jews were returning from exile. Understandably, there was plenty of anti-government feeling in some of the groups of Jesus-followers and some were muttering about not paying their taxes. I really felt like I had to say something.

You see, nobody thinks that governments are a brilliant idea. They're often brutal, oppressive and exploitative. However, they also serve a useful purpose; they help keep competition and vengeance in check. They are one of God's strange gifts. They are necessary only because of human sinfulness and they have a couple of essential functions. By and large they are better than the alternative.

Verses 1–7 Respect the civil authorities

So, I told all the Jesus-followers in Rome that they should accept the authority of the government and that God had given us our governors. To resist them amounts to resisting God and will involve consequences. Now, I think it's important to say that government has a limited role and purpose; it can't do whatever it wants. Its task is to promote good conduct by dealing with bad conduct. The people involved in the courts are motivated by wrath in this. They exercise this and deal with wrongdoing so that individual victims of crime and their families don't have to. We all contribute to the costs involved in this by paying our taxes. Those who fail to respect the authorities and avoid paying their taxes are likely to get punished. The last thing we needed was for the Jesus-followers in Rome to get themselves exiled again.

1. God has instituted human governments and they exist because of God. Therefore, we should acknowledge their authority. This is, of course, a general principle. It does not mean there are never exceptions. The scriptures are full of examples of God's people challenging the powers that be when that was necessary.
2. As a rule, the authorities should not be actively resisted because God has appointed them. Resistance usually brings unwanted consequences.
3. Rulers have a purpose. It is to create a context in which all the members of society can engage with one another peacefully. To this end, those who do wrong are to be punished. Those whose conduct is good should have nothing to fear.

4. The authorities are entitled to use violence in their pursuit of punishing wrong. This is what I meant by 'the sword'. The state can exercise 'wrath', that is, it is rightly motivated to exercise control through judicial processes. This is a main part of its God-given purpose.

5. Therefore, we have two reasons to comply with the authorities. One of these is because they are entitled to punish those who resist them, but more significantly, given their role is given to them by God, it's simply the right thing to do.

6. Something similar applies to the payment of taxes. These are the way we contribute to the necessary costs involved in government.

7. Those who follow Jesus are to give due recognition to the state and to the role God has given it. We do this by contributing our taxes, paying our dues and honouring the authorities.

I think I need to be clear that I wrote this without much nuance because of the particular situation in Rome and the things that had happened to the Jews there. The principle is clearly right but there are occasions when the people of God must think twice before obeying the authorities. Indeed, there are plenty of instances where governments have been a terror to the good rather than to the bad and where they have allowed the powerful to break the rules with impunity while coming down like a ton of bricks on minor indiscretions by the poor. When this happens the followers of King Jesus have to consider carefully how they should behave in relation to the authorities.

Verses 8-10 The heart and true purpose of the Instruction

Let me stress, the position I am advocating is an ethic of obedience to the teachings of Jesus based on our identity as people who belong to him. It is not based on the outward parts of the Instruction. But it is related to the inward meaning of the Instruction. In particular, I recall that when King Jesus was asked to name the greatest commandment, he answered by referring to the Shema – the call to love God with every part of our being – and the reference in Leviticus to loving one's neighbour. These are the heart of the Instruction and if anyone obeys them then the Instruction's true purpose is fulfilled. If you keep these, you keep all the others that matter. You have the basis for living in the way that God originally intended.

8. In this verse I stated an important principle. To enjoy Life, we should live as though we owe it to everyone to love them. If we love other people, we are fulfilling the real purpose of the Instruction. This is the heart of the way of living that God originally intended for humans.

9. Indeed, all the commandments, particularly those that relate to our attitudes to other people, are all summed up in the command to love our neighbours as ourselves. If we do this positive thing, love others, we will not break any of the other commandments. In a sense, the other commandments help to make clear the sorts of actions that constitute a failure to love our neighbours.

10. That's why I can insist that love does no wrong to others and so can assert that those who love are living out the real point of the Instruction. They are living in the way God intended.

The instruction still has an important role. However, the focus should not be on the parts that impact the outer person, things like circumcision, but on the parts that direct the inner person, like the commands to love God and our neighbour. The outer marks are not wrong in themselves but can be unhelpful if you treat them as though they were the heart of the matter when they are only intended to be signs that the inner aspects of the Instruction are being followed. It's the inner aspects that matter. I don't object to Jews who continue to practise the outer aspects on the basis that they're a sign of the inner ones, but I do object to people who think that the outer aspects should be imposed on the non-Jews who follow Jesus as though you can't belong to the people of God without them. This was the issue when I wrote to the churches in Galatia.

Verses 11-14 Understanding the time

The other important thing for the Jesus-followers in Rome was to be aware of the time. Basically, since the resurrection of Jesus and the gift of the Spirit, we are living in the times of promise. These are the last days, although I'd no idea when I wrote this letter how long they might go on for. That was never really the point. The point was to persuade people to live in the light of the coming presence of King Jesus. We live as those who are ready for the light to dawn and behave appropriately. This means that we don't live part of our lives in secret and do different things there. We live as though everything we do takes place in the presence of God. Indeed, we are in Jesus, we have put him on like someone might put on a uniform and so we do not do things in accordance with the part of our nature that is prone to Sin.

11. The point here is that since the resurrection of Jesus and the giving of the Holy Spirit, we know that the last times have begun. The clock is ticking. The time for us to fully share in God's salvation is getting nearer by the day. That will be the time when everything will be as God intended. We are called to live like that now, today.

12. I continue to make much the same point. The day that is coming is the time of the fullness of God's salvation. It's time to start living as we will when that day dawns. The distorted ways of life that belonged in the night are no longer appropriate to those who follow King Jesus.

13. I list some examples of ways of living that belong in the night, and which are not the sorts of things that those who follow Jesus should get involved with.

14. Instead we should clothe ourselves in King Jesus. By putting on Jesus, we become like him. We do this through prayer and through the work of the Spirit within us. This means there's no place for things that focus on the parts of us that are prone to Sin.

You will see from this section that my teaching about the last days is not concerned with speculation about the future but with the ethical implications of the time we live in. The fact that the day is about to dawn means that we need to live as those who belong to that day. The call on us is to live as God originally intended. This is not something that can be put off in the hope that it will become easier. Now is the time for Life. In the age to come, everyone will live in this way. The Jesus-followers are those who have already started in the here and now to live the Life of the age to come.