

Romans 13 - Messianic Politics and the Governing Ones

Romans 13:1-7

“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. 2 Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. 3 For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; 4 for it is God’s servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer. 5 Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience. 6 For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God’s servants, busy with this very thing. 7 Pay to all what is due them—taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due.”

We arrive at a section of Paul’s argument that has been vastly abused over the centuries. Blindly following those in power, those in authority, is not the aim of this argument.

“One of the chief ways in which Paul’s perspective has been distorted in the history of theological and ecclesiastical interpretation is through the separation of segments of his argument from their context (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 189).”

“For example, we would have to be clear that this should not be read as taking back Paul’s radical critique of the injustice of the imperial system in the first chapter. Recall that there he had indicted the politics of Rome as manifestly incapable of administering justice, since the Roman ruling class was characterized by a thoroughgoing opposition to divine justice (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 190).”

“The ‘authorities’ are those who act on behalf of the law and thus ‘administer’ justice as it is encoded in the law. Apart from this legal function related to the question of justice, there are not ‘authorities’ in the sense being written about here (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 191).”

“But Paul and his readers also know that authorities are not so benign. They, like the law, are corrupted by injustice (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 191).”

“There is another sense in which authorities are **instituted by God** or **appointed by God** consistent with Paul’s earlier argument. It has to do with Paul’s appropriation of the prophetic tradition’s view of the arrogant empires that threatened Israel with destruction. They are regarded as **instruments of wrath** not because they themselves are just but because they serve to punish the injustice of Israel itself (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 192).”

“What is invoked here is the world-historical function of ‘imperial’ authority that serves, despite its own arrogance and injustice, to awaken the sense of the awesome claim of justice. Of course, neither for the prophets nor for Paul does this mean that God favors these authorities. On the contrary, they are already consigned to destruction just when they are at the apex of their power. For the arc of history aims not at wrath and destruction but at mercy and salvation. And this messianic aim is accomplished not by unjust instruments of wrath but by the justice instruments of the messianic itself (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 192).”

Verses 6 and 7 - the issue of taxes and paying what is owed.

“Here the subversive gesture occurs in a rather different way. Paul has just said to **give honor to the one due honor**, but he had already said to the messianic group that they should compete to give honor to one another, thereby undermining the whole system of seeking honor. Honor is to be given away rather than claimed (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 193).”

“The messianic politics of Paul, then, does not entail a taking over of the state and its functions... For Paul, the state is essentially irrelevant to messianic politics. There is no point in an attempt to assume state power, for it belongs to an order that is no longer pertinent: it has a past, not a future... Here as elsewhere, the aim is to take the world by surprise - the messianic surprise of love. Or, as he has already said, seeking where it depends on us, to be at peace with all (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 193-94).”

Romans 13:8

“Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.”

“The entire economy of debt is here brought undercut. Of course, love is not the payment of a debt. It is the excess, the ‘how much more’ that is the very character of divine justice. The law is here relativized by being both abolished and exceeded all at once (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 194).”

Romans 13:9-10

“The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet”; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” 10 Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.”

“It is characteristic of Paul that neither here nor elsewhere does he supplement his exhortation by appealing to the teachings of the messiah. Moreover, when he does cite the commandments, he refers not to the ‘religious’ or God-oriented ones [honor God alone, Sabbath, etc.] but only to what might be termed the ‘interhuman commandments,’ those that have to do with not wronging the neighbor, the other human being. This is the very heart of divine justice, the messianic justice, with which Paul is concerned (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 195).”

“From Paul we already know that this ‘love’ or concern for the well-being of the other extends also to the enemy so is without restriction. It is this unrestricted commitment to the welfare of all without exception that marks the messianic exigency of a sociality beyond or outside the law. The messianic is therefore a radical humanism that aims at a certain universalism (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 196).”

Romans 13:11-12

“Besides this, you know what time [*kairos* - **God time**] it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; 12 the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light...”

“The now of messianic time is a moment when it is still dark, still obscure [so a time of danger and affliction], yet it is also the time when the day approaches precisely in and as this darkness (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 197).”

“As regularly happens in Paul, the indicative [the salvation is nearer, the hour of awakening] becomes the imperative to conduct oneself in accordance with the true time, the *kairos* of approaching light (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 198).”

“The new society that is coming into being is thus itself messianic, both in its state of affliction and in its active love of the neighbor. It so assimilates itself to the messiah as to be the body of the messiah, the way that the messiah becomes visible as well as vulnerable - and also victorious in the midst of the death-dominated present age (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 199).”