

JOHN MURRAY

THE EPISTLE
TO THE
ROMANS



ROMANS XIII

B. THE CIVIL MAGISTRATE (13:1-7)

13:1-7

- 1 Let every soul be in subjection to the higher powers: for there is no power but of God; and the *powers* that be are ordained of God,
- 2 Therefore he that resisteth the power, withstandeth the ordinance of God: and they that withstand shall receive to themselves judgment.
- 3 For rulers are not a terror to the good work, but to the evil. And wouldest thou have no fear of the power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise from the same:
- 4 for he is a minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is a minister of God, an avenger for wrath to him that doeth evil.
- 5 Wherefore *ye* must needs be in subjection, not only because of the wrath, but also for conscience' sake.
- 6 For for this cause *ye* pay tribute also; for they are ministers of God's service, attending continually upon this very thing.
- 7 Render to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute *is due*; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor.

This section is not a parenthesis in this part of the epistle extending from 12:1 through 15:13. The obligations incident to our subjection to civil authorities belong to "the good and acceptable and perfect will of God" (12:2). The reason for dealing with this topic at this point should not be artificially sought in some kind of connection with what immediately precedes as, for example, that in 12:19-21 Paul is dealing with the injustices Christians may suffer at the hands of their personal enemies and in 13:1-7 with the injustices which they may suffer at the hands of magistrates or which are properly avenged by the magistrate. It

is true that the juxtaposition of 12:17-21 and 13:1-7 is most significant for the avoidance and correction of erroneous applications of the teaching in 12:17-21, as was noted earlier.¹ But we may not say that this was the reason for the sequence which Paul follows. It is apparent how diverse are the concrete aspects of the believer's life dealt with in 12:3-21 and particularly how many of the circumstances in his social life come within the apostle's purview. In 13:1-7 we have an all-important relationship affecting the life and witness of a believer and there is good reason why Paul should treat of it, as he does, in this portion of the epistle. There is also sufficient ground for thinking that there was some urgent need for pressing home upon the believers at Rome the teaching which is given here respecting the prerogatives of magistrates and the obligations of subjects in relation thereto.

We know from the New Testament itself that the Jews had questions regarding the rights of the Roman government (*cf.* Matt. 22:16, 17; Mark 12:14; Luke 20:21, 22). We also know that the Jews were disposed to pride themselves on their independence (*cf.* John 8:33). We read also of seditious movements (Acts 5:36, 37). There is also the evidence from other sources respecting the restlessness of the Jews under the Roman yoke.² We are told that Claudius "had commanded all the Jews to depart from Rome" (Acts 18:2). This expulsion must have been occasioned by the belief that Jews were inimical to the imperial interests if not the aftermath of Jewish insurrection. In the mind of the authorities Christianity was associated with Judaism and any seditious temper attributed to Judaism would likewise be charged to Christians. This created a situation in which it was necessary for Christians to avoid all revolutionary aspirations or actions as well as insubordination to magistrates in the rightful exercise of their authority.

Not only was there this danger arising from association with Judaism, there was also within the Christian community the danger of perverted notions of freedom, especially in view of the kingship and lordship of Christ. The fact that Paul on three occasions³ in his epistles found it necessary to reflect on our duties in reference to magistrates and Peter likewise to the same effect in

¹ *Cf.* comments *ad* 12:19.

² *Cf.* citations in Liddon: *op. cit.*, p. 246.

³ In addition to Rom. 13:1-7 *cf.* I Tim. 2:1-3; Tit. 3:1.

his first epistle⁴ shows that there was a reason for reminding believers of the necessity to be subject to the magisterial authorities. Furthermore, Christians often suffered at the hands of these authorities and there was greater reason to draw the line between the disobedience which loyalty to Christ demanded (*cf.* Acts 4:19, 20; 5:29) and the obedience which the same loyalty required.

1, 2 "The higher powers" refer without question to the governing authorities in the commonwealth. The term "authorities" is the more literal rendering and points to the right to rule belonging to the persons involved and to the subjection required on the part of the subjects. At the time when Paul wrote civil magistracy was exercised by the Roman government and the direct reference is to the executors of this government. The only question that arises is whether "authorities" denote also invisible angelic powers standing behind the human governors. This question would not arise were it not that in the New Testament and especially in Paul's epistles this same term "authorities" is used to denote suprahuman beings, and Oscar Cullmann has vigorously contended that in this instance the term has a dual reference, to the angelic powers and to the human executive agents.⁵ The governing authorities are those in whom are vested the right and the power of ruling in the commonwealth and the evidence does not indicate that any other than human agents are in view.

"Every soul" is to be in subjection. Every soul means every person and does not reflect on the soul in man as distinguished from the body. Frequently in Scripture the word "soul" is used in this sense as synonymous with the whole person and sometimes as equivalent to the personal pronoun (*cf.* Matt. 12:18; Luke 12:19; Acts 2:27, 41, 43; 3:23; 7:14; Rom. 2:9; Heb. 10:38, 39; James 1:21; 5:20; I Pet. 1:9; 3:20; Rev. 16:3). The implication is that no person is exempt from this subjection; no person enjoys special privileges by which he may ignore or feel himself free to violate the ordinances of magisterial authority. Neither infidelity nor faith offers immunity. It is of particular significance that it is to the church Paul is writing. The Westminster Confession of Faith states the case well when it says: "Infidelity, or difference

⁴ I Pet. 2:13-17.

⁵ See Appendix C (pp. 252 ff.) for presentation and criticism of this thesis.

in religion, doth not make void the magistrates' just and legal authority, nor free the people from their due obedience to them: from which ecclesiastical persons are not exempted, much less hath the Pope any power and jurisdiction over them in their dominions, or lives, if he shall judge them to be heretics, or upon any other pretence whatsoever".⁶

The term for "subjection" is one more inclusive than that for obedience. It implies obedience when ordinances to be obeyed are in view, but there is more involved. Subjection indicates the recognition of our subordination in the whole realm of the magistrates' jurisdiction and willing subservience to their authority. This is enforced still more if the rendering of the whole clause is given the reflexive form: "Let every soul subject himself to the governing authorities". This rendering, for which much can be said, stresses active participation in the duty of subjection.

The next two clauses give the reason for this subjection.⁷ They are explanatory the one of the other. They point to the source whence civil government proceeds and to the sanction by which subjection is demanded. Certain observations will bring out the meaning. (1) Paul is dealing with existing governmental agents. This is the force of "the *powers* that be". He is not now treating of government in the abstract nor entering into the question of the different forms of government. He is making categorical statements regarding the authorities in actual existence. (2) When he says they are "of God", he means that they derive their origin, right, and power from God. This is borne out by several considerations urged later in this passage but here it is expressly stated and excludes from the outset every notion to the effect that authority in the state rests upon agreement on the part of the governed or upon the consent of the governed. Authority to govern and the subjection demanded of the governed reside wholly in the fact of divine institution. (3) The propositions that the authorities are of God and ordained of God are not to be understood as referring merely to God's decretive will. The terms could be used to express God's decretive ordination but this is not their

⁶ Chapter XXIII, Section IV.

⁷ In the first clause *ὑπό* is more strongly attested. *ἀπό* is the preposition we might expect and probably explains its occurrence in D, G, and other authorities. In the second clause the addition of *ἐξουσία* after *οἰσαι* has much authority against it and should not be adopted.

precise import here. The context shows that the ordination of which the apostle now speaks is that of institution which is obliged to perform the appointed functions. The civil magistrate is not only the means decreed in God's providence for the punishment of evildoers but God's instituted, authorized, and prescribed instrument for the maintenance of order and the punishing of criminals who violate that order. When the civil magistrate through his agents executes just judgment upon crime, he is executing not simply God's decretive will but he is also fulfilling God's preceptive will, and it would be sinful for him to refrain from so doing.⁸

For these reasons subjection is required and resistance is a violation of God's law and meets with judgment. Since verse 3 speaks of the "terror" which rulers are to the evil work there must be some reference to the penal judgment which magistrates inflict upon evil-doers. But since all that precedes stresses the ordinance of God there must also be reflection upon the divine sanction by which this penal judgment is executed and therefore upon the judgment of God of which the magistrate's retribution is an expression. We have here in this term "judgment" the twofold aspect from which it is to be viewed. It is punishment dispensed by the governing authorities. But it is also an expression of God's own wrath and it is for this reason that it carries the sanction of God and its propriety is certified.⁹

There are many questions which arise in actual practice with which Paul does not deal. In these verses there are no expressed qualifications or reservations to the duty of subjection. It is, however, characteristic of the apostle to be absolute in his terms when dealing with a particular obligation. At the same time, on the analogy of his own teaching elsewhere or on the analogy of Scripture, we are compelled to take account of exceptions to the absolute terms in which an obligation is affirmed. It must be so in this instance. We cannot but believe that he would have endorsed and practised the word of Peter and other apostles: "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29; cf. 4:19, 20). The

⁸ Cf. review by the present writer in *The Westminster Theological Journal*, VII, 2, May 1945, pp. 188ff.

⁹ *ἐαυτοῖς λήμψονται* may express the thought of bringing upon themselves and in that event the responsibility for the penal judgment inflicted would be expressed.

magistrate is not infallible nor is he the agent of perfect rectitude. When there is conflict between the requirements of men and the commands of God, then the word of Peter must take effect.

Again Paul does not deal with the questions that arise in connection with revolution. Without question in these two verses we are not without an index to what we ought to do when revolution has taken place. "The powers that be" refer to the *de facto* magistrates. And in this passage as a whole there are principles which bear upon the right or wrong of revolution. But these matters which become acute difficulties for conscientious Christians are not introduced in this passage. The reason lies on the surface. The apostle is not writing an essay on casuistical theology but setting forth the cardinal principles pertaining to the institution of government and regulating the behaviour of Christians.¹⁰

3, 4 While the first clause of verse 3 attaches itself to the last clause of verse 2, it is scarcely proper to say that it assigns the ground why rebels will bring upon themselves penal judgment.¹¹ It is preferably taken as enunciating the prerogative of the rulers, arising from the appointment or ordinance of God, and therefore as validating the penal judgment which these rulers administer. It should be observed that in this clause we have an express intimation of the magistrate's function and it is because he exercises this office that he has the authority to inflict punishment.

The "terror" which rulers are to the evil work is the fear of punishment evoked in the hearts of men by reason of the authority vested in rulers to execute this punishment. This fear can be of two kinds, the fear that inhibits wrongdoing and the fear that results when wrong has been committed. It would appear that the latter is particularly in view. In the next clause the question, "wouldest thou have no fear of the power?" enjoins the absence of the fear that is the result of wrongdoing. This is confirmed by verse 4 when it says, "But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid"; it is the fear of the penalty which the magistrate executes as the bearer of

¹⁰ "With the origin of a government, or its political form the Apostle does not concern himself: nor does he enter upon the question at what point during a period of revolutionary change a given government is to be considered as *οὔσα*, or as non-existent; and when a government, originally illegitimate, acquires a prescriptive right. The imperial authority was too old, and too firm to make these questions practical" (Liddon: *op. cit.*, pp. 247f.).

¹¹ Cf. Liddon and Meyer.

the sword. However, there could also be reference to the fear that inhibits wrongdoing. If we are minded only to do that which is good, then we have no reason to be actuated by the fear that restrains wrongdoing.

When it is said that "rulers are not a terror to the good work but to the evil" the good work and the evil are personified. For what is meant is terror to the person performing evil. There are two observations respecting this clause. (1) The thought is focused upon the punishment of evil-doing. It is significant that the apostle mentions this first of all in dealing with the specific functions assigned to the civil magistrate. There is the tendency in present-day thinking to underestimate the punitive in the execution of government and to suppress this all-important aspect of the magistrate's authority. It is not so in apostolic teaching. (2) It is with the deed that the magistrate is concerned. Paul speaks of the good and evil work. It is not the prerogative of the ruler to deal with all sin but only with sin registered in the action which violates the order that the magistrate is appointed to maintain and promote.

The next clause can be interpreted either as a question or as a statement. In the latter case the rendering would be: "Thou wouldest then have no fear of the power" and means "if thou wouldest have no fear of the power, do that which is good". But it is preferable, with the version quoted, to regard it as a question. The sense is to the same effect. But the question expresses the thought more forcefully. If we do that which is good, then we shall have no reason to fear the ruling authority.

"Thou shalt have praise from the same." The praise given by the magistrate is not reward in the proper sense of the term. Evil-doers receive their punitive reward but those who do well do not receive any meritorious award. The term used for "praise" does not bear this signification but rather that of approval (cf. I Cor. 4:5; II Cor. 8:18; Phil. 4:8; I Pet. 2:14) and is used of the praise that redounds to God for the riches of his grace (cf. Eph. 1:6, 12, 14; Phil. 1:11). This praise may be followed by reward in certain instances but the idea of reward is not implicit in the term. The praise could be expressed by saying that good behaviour secures good standing in the state, a status to be cherished and cultivated.

The first clause in verse 4 states what is, positively, the chief purpose of magisterial authority. The ruler is the minister of God

for good. The term "minister of God" harks back to verses 1 and 2 where the "authority" is said to be of God, ordained of God, and the ordinance of God. But now there is intimated the specific capacity in which this ordination consists. This designation removes every supposition to the effect that magistracy is *per se* evil and serves good only in the sense that as a lesser evil it restrains and counteracts greater evils. The title here accorded the civil ruler shows that he is invested with all the dignity and sanction belonging to God's servant within the sphere of government. This is borne out still further by the purpose for which he is God's servant; he is the minister of God for that which is *good*. And we may not tone down the import of the term "good" in this instance. Paul provides us with a virtual definition of the good we derive from the service of the civil authority when he requires that we pray for kings and all who are in authority "that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and gravity" (I Tim. 2:2). The good the magistrate promotes is that which subserves the interests of piety.

There is a direct, personal address in this clause, expressed in the words "to thee", showing the relevance for the well-being of the individual believer of that service which the magistrate renders.

The second clause, as has been observed above, points to the kind of fear particularly in view in verse 3 and the third clause gives the reason why this fear is to be entertained. This reason is that the magistrate "bears not the sword in vain". The sword which the magistrate carries¹² as the most significant part of his equipment is not merely the sign of his authority but of his right to wield it in the infliction of that which a sword does. It would not be necessary to suppose that the wielding of the sword contemplates the infliction of the death penalty exclusively. It can be wielded to instil the terror of that punishment which it can inflict. It can be wielded to execute punishment that falls short of death. But to exclude the right of the death penalty when the nature of the crime calls for such is totally contrary to that which the sword signifies and executes. We need appeal to no more than New Testament usage to establish this reference. The sword is so frequently associated with death as the instrument of execution

¹² The verb is *φορέω* and is more expressive in this connection than *φέρω*.

(cf. Matt. 26:52; Luke 21:24; Acts 12:2; 16:27; Heb. 11:34, 37; Rev. 13:10) that to exclude its use for this purpose in this instance would be so arbitrary as to bear upon its face prejudice contrary to the evidence.¹³ "In vain" means to no purpose.

"For he is a minister of God, an avenger for wrath to him that doeth evil." In the first clause the ruler is said to be the minister of God for good. Now the same office is accorded to him for avenging evil. The parallelism is noteworthy—the same dignity and investiture belong to the ruler's penal prerogative as to his function in promoting good. This penal function is said to consist in being "an avenger unto wrath" to the evil-doer. This is the first time that the term "wrath" is used in reference to the civil magistrate. In verse 2 we found that the "judgment" alludes to the judgment of God of which the retribution executed by the civil magistrate is the expression and from which this retribution derives its sanction. The question would arise here: whose "wrath" is in view, that of God, or that of the magistrate, or that of both? In 12:19, as demonstrated above, "the wrath" is the wrath of God and the usage would point to the same conclusion in this instance. Furthermore, there is not warrant for thinking that the magistrate's reaction to crime is to be construed in terms of wrath. Hence "wrath" should be regarded as the wrath of God. Thus the magistrate is the avenger in executing the judgment that accrues to the evil-doer from the wrath of God. Again we discover the sanction belonging to the ruler's function; he is the agent in executing God's wrath. And we also see how divergent from biblical teaching is the sentimentality that substitutes the interests of the offender for the satisfaction of justice as the basis of criminal retribution.

5 Commentators are divided on the question whether the necessity enunciated here arises from what is stated in verse 4 or harks back to the whole of the preceding context. It makes little difference to the force of the conclusion drawn in this verse and indicated by "wherefore". In the latter part of verse 4 enough is stated to ground the conclusion of verse 5; the designation "minister of God" as well as the allusion to the ruler as agent in executing God's wrath point to an investiture that demands subjection. But

¹³ The sword is the *insignium juris vitae et necis*.

even if we find the immediate grounding of verse 5 in the last clause of verse 4, we cannot dissociate verse 4b from all that had been stated previously respecting the prerogatives of magistrates as proceeding from the ordinance of God. In any case, no proposition in this passage expresses the divine sanction of civil government more than this one, namely, that we must be subject "for conscience' sake". Paul uses this word "conscience" frequently and it is apparent that the meaning is conscience toward God (cf. Acts 23:1; 24:16; II Cor. 1:12; 4:2; 5:11; I Tim. 1:5; 3:9; II Tim. 1:3). The meaning here must be that we are to subject ourselves out of a sense of obligation to God. The thought then is that we are not only to be subject because insubjection brings upon us penal judgment but also because there is the obligation intrinsic to God's will irrespective of the liability which evil-doing may entail. God alone is Lord of the conscience and therefore to do anything out of conscience or for conscience' sake is to do it from a sense of obligation to God. This is stated expressly in I Peter 2:13: "be subject to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake". The necessity, therefore, is not that of inevitable outcome (cf. Matt. 18:7; Luke 21:23; I Cor. 7:26) but that of ethical demand (cf. I Cor. 9:16).

6 In view of all that is involved in verse 5 regarding the divine sanction by which the magistrate discharges his functions there is no need to seek any remoter basis for the terms with which verse 6 begins, "for for this cause". If the magistrate is to perform the ministry which is given him of God, he must have the material means for the discharge of his labours. Hence the payment¹⁴ of tribute is not a tyrannical imposition but the necessary and proper participation on the part of subjects in the support of government. This reason for the payment of taxes is stated in the latter part of the verse: "for they are ministers of God's service, attending continually upon this very thing".

The term for "ministers" in this instance is different from that used on two occasions in verse 4. But it does not denote a less dignified kind of ministry as if the collection of taxes, since it is a monetary affair, called for the use of a term of inferior signification. This term and its cognates are used in the New Testament, with

¹⁴ There is no reason for taking *τελεῖτε* as imperative.

one possible exception,¹⁵ with reference to the service of God and sometimes of the highest forms of ministry in the worship of God (cf. Luke 1:23; Acts 13:2; Rom. 15:16, 27; II Cor. 9:12; Phil. 2:17; Heb. 1:7, 14; 8:2; 10:11). Hence, if anything, this designation enhances the dignity attaching to the ministry of rulers. In the administration associated with taxes and customs there is to be no depreciation of their office. In the version this thought is properly expressed by saying that they are "ministers of God's service", although in the Greek they are simply called "ministers of God". *(hermee)*

The "very thing" upon which the rulers are said to attend continually must in the context refer to the taxes. It would not be reasonable to regard the antecedent as the more general functions specified in the earlier verses. The thought is now focused on the payment of taxes and this is the "very thing" in view. The verb used in this clause adds likewise to the emphasis that falls in this verse upon the propriety and dignity of this phase of the magistrate's administration (cf. Acts 1:14; 2:42; 6:4; Rom. 12:12; Col. 4:2).¹⁶

By implication this verse also reflects on the purposes for which taxes are collected and on the uses which they serve. They subserve the ends for which rulers are appointed and not the abuses which are so frequently attendant upon the expenditure of them. In the words of Calvin, rulers "should remember that all that they receive from the people is public property, and not a means of satisfying private lust and luxury".¹⁷

7 "Render to all their dues." This should not be taken as a general exhortation that we are to discharge our obligations to all men. It is to be understood of the obligations we owe to those in authority in the state. This limitation is required by the context. With our all-inclusive obligations verses 8-10 deal. But within this sphere of obligation to magistrates the exhortation embraces every kind of debt owing. The "dues" are not merely those pertaining to taxes but, as the remaining part of the verse indicates,

¹⁵ Phil. 2:25; cf. also Phil. 2:30. The Greek word is *leitourgós* (as distinct from *διάκονος* in vs. 4).

¹⁶ *προσκαρτερέω*. Cf. Jesus' own endorsement of custom and tribute in Luke 20:22-25 and the false charge in Luke 23:2.

¹⁷ *Op. cit., ad loc.*

include the debts of veneration and honour. Hence this summary imperative is inclusive of all the obligations to be fulfilled within the sphere of civil government. The form of the imperative underlines the strength accorded to it.

The "tribute" corresponds to our term "tax", levied on persons and property (cf. Luke 20:22; 23:2), "custom" refers to the tax levied on goods and corresponds to customs payments.

"Fear to whom fear." The word used here for fear is the same as that rendered "terror" in verse 3. But in the latter verse the behaviour enjoined is that which will obviate the necessity of fear and therefore the absence of fear is commended, at least the absence of that which will be the occasion for fear. Fear is the accompaniment of wrongdoing. For this reason it might be thought that the magistrate is not in view in this present exhortation: two opposing attitudes would not be commended. Hence, it is thought, God is the person to whom fear is to be accorded as in I Peter 2:17: "Fear God. Honor the king". This interpretation is neither necessary nor feasible. (1) The kind of fear contemplated in verse 3, namely, the fear of the punishment executed for wrongdoing, should be absent in reference to God as well as to the magistrate: we are under an even greater obligation to avoid the conduct that will make us liable to divine retribution. Thus to make God the object does not relieve the apparent discrepancy between the two verses. (2) The apostle is dealing with our obligations to the civil authorities and it would be alien to the coordination and sequence to introduce a reference to the fear we owe to God. The identical form of statement in all four imperatives requires us to believe that they all belong to the same sphere. If the fear of God were meant the name of God would have to be mentioned in order to indicate the break in the sequence.

The solution lies in the different connotations. In verse 3 the fear is that of the punishment to be inflicted; in verse 7 it is the fear of veneration and respect. In reference to God this is the fear of reverential awe (cf. Acts 9:31; Rom. 3:18; II Cor. 7:1; Eph. 5:21), in reference to men the veneration due on account of their station (cf. Eph. 6:5; I Pet. 2:18). It is possible that difference of rank among officers of state is indicated by the terms "fear" and "honor", that the former has in view the respect paid to those on the highest level of authority and the latter that paid to those of lower rank. But there is not sufficient evidence to insist on this distinction. Both

terms could be used for the purpose of emphasizing the obligation to exercise not only the subjection due to rulers but also the veneration that belongs to them as ministers of God.