

BIBLE & BAGEL

Romans – Our Common Faith

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Chapter 13 of Romans can be a little difficult to understand, the common interpretation is that Apostle Paul was instructing the believers to submit to the ruling government, saying that they were ordained by God. However, if we look at the historical background we find that the Emperor during the time of writing of this epistle was Nero, one of the most evil emperors who did unthinkable atrocities, akin to the likes of ISIS today. The believers of those days regarded Nero as being empowered by the devil rather than by God, he in fact had the spirit of the Anti-Christ. So who are the leaders that Apostle Paul was talking about? Read on

Romans 13:1-5

Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. 2 Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves. 3 For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. 4 For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil. 5 Therefore you must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience' sake. NKJV

He says that every soul (person) should be subject to the ruling authorities and these authorities are appointed by God and those who resist them will bring judgment upon themselves.

If this referred to the Roman government of those days then Apostle Paul would have been telling the Christians to worship Nero as Lord and to worship the myriad of gods that the Romans did, also they were supposed to take part in the temple worship which included visits to the temple prostitutes, and if they refused the consequences they suffered would be considered God's judgment for them. These consequences included being tied to a pole and set on fire while still alive to light up Nero's garden. Would God punish His people for such things in such a manner? Definitely not!

Apostle Paul said that if believers wanted to be free from fear of authorities they should do good by doing good we would not only not have to be afraid of the rulers but also be praised by them. Rulers are God's instrument for good because he bears the sword (symbol of authority and judgment) to punish those who do evil.

"Doing good" according to the Roman government would mean following Roman morals, worshipping Roman gods, eating food that were forbidden in the Torah. Doing good according to God is keeping the Torah, which in the eyes of the Roman government was evil. They considered people who worshipped only one God as pagans, so could Paul advocate that God's people should follow the laws of the land? The Roman government would definitely not praise anyone who kept Torah, in fact they would more likely be punished. However if Paul was speaking of the spiritual leaders who were considered synagogue rulers¹, it would give us a different picture.



These synagogue rulers were Jews and for the most part pre-believing Jews. They had authority in the synagogue to excommunicate people from the synagogue. Apostle Paul was speaking to the non-Jews in the Roman congregation, who were meeting in the house of a Jew to submit themselves to these rulers. If they did what was right, if they kept Torah, including keeping the dietary requirements, they not only need not fear the synagogue rulers but they would also earn their praise and thereby these rulers might come to faith in Yeshua.

As to the question of whether we non-Jews are required to keep the dietary requirements, Acts 15 gives us the decision of the “Jerusalem Council” who debated whether or not Gentiles should convert to Judaism to be saved. They made the decision that the Gentiles should keep four things: Not to eat blood, Not to eat food sacrificed to idols, Not to eat animals that died by strangulation and Not to partake of sexual immoralityⁱⁱ. Incidentally all of these were part and parcel of the Roman lifestyle and those who did not do so were considered pagans and outcasts.

In 1 Corinthians 10 when Apostle Paul was giving instructions on whether Christians should eat food that had been offered to idols, he said “all this are permissible but not all things are beneficial”ⁱⁱⁱ. He said that an idol is in fact nothing, but his point was that if in eating these foods another believer is made to stumble then they should avoid it.

So coming back to the congregation in Rome, we saw that there was a mix of people; believers and non-believers both Jewish and Gentile and the Apostle’s emphasis was that they should live together harmoniously and everyone should do their part, as he mentioned in Romans 12:18, that each one should do their best to keep a harmonious relationship in the congregation. Being with a group of Jews presented some special issues; that of food. Eating things that are forbidden among them would cause discomfort and for them to question the faith of the Gentiles, whether they really did worship the God of Israel as they said and not be keeping the commands that He had given. We shall study more about this in Romans 14. It all goes back to Apostle Paul saying to non-Jewish believers in chapter 12 that they are to offer their **bodies** as living sacrifices, this would include the food they ate and all this was done not to keep some religious law but to respect the other and honour the other and by so doing win them over to Messiah Yeshua.

Please note that I am not advocating that Christians should not submit to human government, I believe that as long as the laws of man do not contradict the laws of God we are in all instances to keep the law of the land. I am studying this chapter in the light of the time when it was written and the societal norms of the day, when we put the Word in that context we see that obviously Apostle Paul could not have been referring to the human government of his day.

ⁱ Luke 8:41, 13:14

ⁱⁱ Acts 15:18

ⁱⁱⁱ 1 Corinthians 10:23

