

Authority: Belonging to God

Devotional Reading: Proverbs 31:4–9

Background Scripture: Mark 12:17; Romans 13:1, 6–8;
1 Peter 2:13–17

Mark 12:17

¹⁷ Then Jesus said to them, “Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.”

And they were amazed at him.

Romans 13:1, 6–8

¹ Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.

⁶ This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God’s servants, who give their full time to governing. ⁷ Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.

⁸ Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law.

1 Peter 2:13–17

¹³ Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, ¹⁴ or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. ¹⁵ For it is God’s will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people. ¹⁶ Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as God’s slaves. ¹⁷ Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honor the emperor.



Key Text

Jesus said to them, “Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.” And they were amazed at him. —Mark 12:17

Social Teachings of the Church

Unit 2: Fulfilling Our Obligations to Family and Community

Lessons 5–8

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Identify the major themes that unite Mark 12:17; Romans 13:1, 6–8; and 1 Peter 2:13–17.
2. Analyze God’s directive for relating to civil authorities who rule justly.
3. Commit to honoring God by praying for elected leaders.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. Higher Authority
- B. Lesson Context: General
- C. Lesson Context: Mark
- D. Lesson Context: Romans
- E. Lesson Context: 1 Peter

I. Teaching on Authority (Mark 12:17)

II. Tribute to Authority (Romans 13:1, 6–8)

- A. Source of Authority (v. 1)
Who’s Really in Charge?
- B. Payment of Debt (vv. 6–7)
- C. Fulfillment of Law (v. 8)

III. Submission to Authority (1 Peter 2:13–17)

- A. Doing Good (vv. 13–15)
- B. Behaving Properly (vv. 16–17)
The Highest Respect

Conclusion

- A. The Highest Authority
- B. Prayer
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Introduction

A. Higher Authority

When I was in kindergarten, my dad had a rule against taking our toys out of the house. He feared we would lose them. One day I took a toy to school. When I got home, I began to tell my father what I had done. Before I could explain, he yelled at me and sent me to my room.

A few minutes later, he opened the door with tears in his eyes, knelt beside me, and asked for my forgiveness. My mother told him that I had taken the toy as a present for another kid. This child had little money, and he brought nothing to show and tell. I told my dad I thought Jesus wanted me to share with the boy. My father looked at me and said, “Yes, he did, pal. I was unfair to you. I’m so sorry.” My dad was always quick to admit his mistakes.

Every earthly father derives his title and role from our heavenly Father (Ephesians 3:14–15). God charges every father with the duty and authority to train, guide, and protect his children. Scripture commands children to obey their parents (6:1), but the authority of earthly parents is not absolute. Similarly, Scripture asks believers to respect governmental authority while offering ultimate submission to the Lord.

B. Lesson Context: General

The Gospel of Mark and the epistles of Romans and 1 Peter contain some of the sharpest statements in the New Testament about how Christ-followers should relate to their governments. These passages guide us as we walk out our duties to God and nation. Two aspects of first-century context are helpful for modern readers in this regard.

First, the intended audiences of these texts lived under the dominion of a foreign empire. The Roman emperor held total authority. He ruled locally through a structure of governors and other officials. Roman citizens possessed a few rights, but most of the emperor’s subjects had minimal legal protections and no say in the political processes that affected them. Public objection toward ruling powers was considered seditious, and officials responded swiftly with overwhelming force.

Consequently, the populace possessed few avenues for political or cultural change.

Second, the earliest Christians viewed spreading the gospel as their primary responsibility. Therefore, they avoided actions that might hinder their message. They discouraged behaviors that would dishonor the faith community in the eyes of unbelievers—the apostles aimed at discipleship, not political revolution.

C. Lesson Context: Mark

The Gospel of Mark contains a series of stories with a consistent structure: (1) Jesus' opponents pose a tricky or controversial question, hoping he will stumble in his response, but (2) Jesus gives a response that challenges, frustrates, or silences them (Mark 2:18–22; 2:23–28; 3:1–6; 7:1–13; 11:27–33; 12:13–17; 12:18–27; 12:28–34). The opponents aimed to trick Jesus, harm his reputation, and subvert his authority (12:13). These opponents came from religious sects like the Pharisees and Sadducees, as well as political groups like the Herodians. Conflicts between members of religious sects or philosophical schools were common in the ancient world—as the old saying goes, “Nothing makes better friends than a common enemy.”

D. Lesson Context: Romans

Paul wrote this letter to introduce himself to the followers of Christ in Rome. He explained the gospel message, corrected rumors, and addressed misconceptions regarding his character and message. One distortion of his teaching was that Paul

encouraged his converts to “do evil” so that “good may come” (Romans 3:8). Paul provided examples of upright behavior in response (Romans 12–15).

E. Lesson Context: 1 Peter

The epistle of 1 Peter was most likely written from Rome in the early AD 60s. During this time, the evil Emperor Nero reigned (AD 53–68). Therefore, we detect a coded reference to the city of Rome as Peter greets his readers from the church “who is in Babylon” (1 Peter 5:13; compare Revelation 14:8; 16:19; 17:5; 18:2). The Babylonian empire brought about the exile of the southern kingdom of Judah (586 BC). In Jewish literature contemporary to 1 Peter, Babylon represented decadence, immorality, and opposition to God. Some Jews, like the authors of 4 Ezra and 2 Baruch (non-biblical books from the collection known as the Apocrypha), also used “Babylon” as a code name for Rome. The author of Revelation calls Rome “Babylon” too.

Peter addresses his letter to the “exiles scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia” (1 Peter 1:1). By using the term “exiles,” Peter encourages Christ's followers to perceive themselves primarily as citizens of God's kingdom, even as he addresses the responsibility owed to their earthly government.

I. Teaching on Authority

(Mark 12:17)

17. Then Jesus said to them, “Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's.” And they were amazed at him.

The conflict here is prompted by the question of whether it is “right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar” (Mark 12:14). Jesus' questioners are the Pharisees and Herodians (12:13). Although these groups do not typically work together, in this case, they both desire to discredit Jesus no matter how he responds. If Jesus answers *yes*, the Pharisees can say Jesus violates the Law of Moses. If he answers *no*, the Herodians—whose power comes from Rome—can charge him with treason.

Jesus answers by requesting a coin (Mark 12:15–16). After his opponents verify Caesar's image on

How to Say It

Bithynia	Bih- <i>thin</i> -ee-uh.
Cappadocia	Kap-uh- <i>doe</i> -shuh.
Felix	<i>Fee</i> -licks.
Festus	<i>Fes</i> -tus.
Herodians	Heh- <i>roe</i> -dee-unz.
Judean	Joo- <i>dee</i> -un.
Pharisees	<i>Fair</i> -ih-seez.
Pilate	<i>Pie</i> -lut.
Pontus	<i>Pon</i> -tuss.
Sadducees	<i>Sad</i> -you-seez.
Septuagint	Sep- <i>too</i> -ih-jent.

it, Jesus directs them to *give back to Caesar* what is due him. Using the coin recognizes Caesar's earthly authority and the benefits they receive from Caesar's civil government. One may consider here the advantages that empires provide like military order, safe roads, and superior buildings. With the enjoyment of these assets comes a certain obligation. Then Jesus continues, the people are also to give to God the things owed him. Believers owe God honor, respect, obedience, and worship. Caesar is not the ultimate authority nor a deity.

Despite his opponents' attempt to trick him, Jesus answers with all wisdom and grace. His answer gives Roman listeners no room to claim that Christ-followers are disloyal to the state. God's people are responsible for their earthly citizenship as well as their heavenly citizenship.

What Do You Think?

Do you consider paying taxes a part of your spiritual integrity? Why, or why not?

Digging Deeper

How do you faithfully approach your earthly citizenship? In what ways does earthly citizenship reflect on your heavenly citizenship?

II. Tribute to Authority

(Romans 13:1, 6–8)

A. Source of Authority (v. 1)

1. Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.

Paul addresses how believers should relate to earthly authorities (compare Titus 3:1). To be *subject to* means to be ranked under another. We are to submit because *God* establishes all earthly *authorities*. Just prior to this directive, Paul stresses the importance of believers living peacefully among themselves and under government (Romans 12:9–21). The thoughts in this verse are a logical extension of those requirements.

Yet Paul is not demanding total obedience to the whims of every evil or tyrannical ruler. The primary decision is whether the directives of an

earthly ruler conflict with the directives of God. Paul was beaten and imprisoned multiple times for allegedly unlawful conduct (Acts 16:22–24; 22:22–29; 2 Corinthians 11:23–25). When the commands of human authorities conflicted with his duties as God's servant, Paul obeyed God. An even clearer example of this concept is the response of Peter and the other apostles to the Sanhedrin in Acts 5:29: "We must obey God rather than human beings!" (compare Acts 4:19).

What Do You Think?

Do you struggle with power and with those who exercise power over you? In what ways is submission difficult?

Digging Deeper


In what circumstances is it appropriate to go against earthly authority? Give specific examples.

Who's Really in Charge?

One day I conducted an experiment in my English class. I sat in the back, quietly watched, and took notes in a notebook. With no one obviously leading from the front, student leaders emerged. Hesitantly, one student walked to the board and outlined a lesson. Then another student challenged his leadership and tried to take over. Students quickly chose their favorite "teacher" and loudly protested the opposing leader.

I stayed out of the negotiations but made sure violence did not erupt. The experiment was an illustration related to a novel we were reading. I remained the authority in the class, but I relinquished some of it for the sake of the lesson. I did not agree with everything the would-be leaders said or did, but I let them have authority for the sake of their learning.

We sometimes forget that God is still the authority "in the room." When governmental leadership makes decisions we don't understand, it is easy to feel like God has lost control. He hasn't; he just gives authority to others in some measure, like I did for my class. As believers, we must honor others, submit to authority, and let God worry about the details. How can we bet-



All authority belongs to God.

Visual for Lesson 6. *Point to the visual and say, "Christians submit to earthly authority for the Lord's sake. All authority belongs to God."*

ter exemplify Christlike behavior in our attitude toward authority? How can we serve others well regardless of who is in power? —B. R.

B. Payment of Debt (vv. 6–7)

6. This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing.

This is also indicates Paul's reasoning. To find the antecedent of *why*, we look to the verses just before the one at hand. Paul states that governing powers serve the populace by upholding "right" behavior and punishing "wrong" (Romans 13:3–4). Then he appeals to the reader's conscience (13:5). Since the governing authorities *are God's servants*, then shouldn't one's conscience require that they be supported? The fact that they do their jobs on a full-time basis further buttresses Paul's line of thought.

In any era, taxes feel like (and are) a burden. The extortion committed by corrupt tax collectors in the first century did not help. Despite the injustice of imperial taxation, Paul invites his audience to view paying their taxes not just as a legal obligation but as a moral one as well. A primary element of God's bestowal of authority on local and national leaders is to maintain peace, safety, and order.

The Greek word translated *servants* is different from the word translated "servant" twice in Romans 13:4. In the earlier two instances, the

word is the source of our word *deacon*. But the word here rendered as "servants" only sometimes refers to those devoted to religious service (Romans 15:16; Hebrews 1:7; 8:2). The old Greek version of the Old Testament, known as the Septuagint, uses it this way often (consider Numbers 4:37, 41; Isaiah 61:6), but the term applies to service in broad senses as well (2 Kings 4:43; 6:15). In the New Testament, the term also describes someone who performs duties toward others for the sake of the Lord (Philippians 2:25; Hebrews 1:7, 14; 8:2; 10:11; etc.). It leans toward those committed to civic good, as in "public servants."

7. Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.

The big picture here concerns how to act on one's debts. Paul approaches this topic in terms of four categories. The first is *taxes*, which refers to direct taxes (compare Luke 20:22; 23:2). The second category is *revenue*, which refers to custom duties and fees on gross income. Secular authorities require taxes to function.

Leadership positions deserve the deference inherent in the words *respect* and *honor*, the last two categories. In the Old Testament, *respect* is sometimes used for reverence toward human beings (Deuteronomy 2:25; 1 Chronicles 14:17). But throughout the Bible, the word also describes the holy awe one experiences in the presence of God or his miraculous work (2 Samuel 23:3; 2 Chronicles 19:7; Acts 9:31; Romans 3:18). *Honor* refers more generally to the respect given to others, whether political leaders (1 Peter 2:17), parents (Mark 7:10), spouses (1 Peter 3:7), widows (1 Timothy 5:3), or God (Revelation 4:11).

What Do You Think?

How do you discern whether someone deserves your respect and honor?

Digging Deeper

In what practical ways do you show reverence and respect toward government and community?

C. Fulfillment of Law (v. 8)

8. Let no debt remain outstanding, except

the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law.

This verse is connected to the previous seven by the concept of obligation. Paul expands believers' responsibility beyond the political and secular realms. The only debt not to be paid off that aligns with God's kingdom is the commitment *to love one another*. The requirement to love one another renews continually, with every encounter.

Paul uses both *one another* and *others* here. Some commentators argue that the debt of *love* is owed only to fellow believers, as consistent with Paul's use of the phrase "one another" in other writings (example: Galatians 5:13). But the second half of this verse indicates we are to love people in general. This matches Jesus' parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37). Believers are called to a wide target of love.

Paul continues by offering a reason for exhibiting love: it meets the law's requirement (Leviticus 19:18; compare Mark 12:31). Paul sets the groundwork for the "acceptance" he will specify in Romans 14.

III. Submission to Authority

(1 Peter 2:13–17)

A. Doing Good (vv. 13–15)

13a. Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority:

Writing from Rome, Peter calls believers to respectful citizenship. His directive is truly remarkable, given the persecution by Emperor Nero at the time (see Lesson Context). Even so, Peter emphasizes the authority of governmental directives by stating that the people should obey *every human authority* (compare Romans 13:1; Titus 3:1). But such submission is not absolute. Peter makes this clear when he explains his act of civil disobedience in Acts 5:29.

As believers follow the laws of the earthly kingdoms in which they reside, their submission will be *for the Lord's sake*. How this happens is explained as Peter continues.

13b–14. Whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right.

Following the general instruction of the previous half-verse, Peter names two offices of earthly authority. First, the *emperor, as the supreme* refers to whoever rules as the overarching *authority*. As Peter writes, that person is Emperor Nero in Rome (see Lesson Context). Second, *governors* are regional managers. During Peter's time, governors oversaw all the minor Roman provinces. Judean governors mentioned in the New Testament are Pilate (Matthew 27:2, 11; Luke 3:1), Felix (Acts 23:24–26), and Festus (Acts 24:27; 26:32).

A primary task of government is protecting the innocent from *those who do wrong* (compare Romans 13:3–5). A congenial by-product of living a law-abiding life is the resulting praise of *those who do right*. Such commendation is not a primary goal to be sought, however (compare John 12:43; 2 Corinthians 10:12); rather, it is a desirable by-product that reflects well on God. Peter thus calls believers to consider how their behavior serves as a witness of God to an unbelieving world. God's reputation is at stake! This matches what Jesus says in Matthew 10:18.

15. For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people.

Peter appeals to God's *will* to stress that believers are to be models of proper living. Naysayers of the Christian faith accused Jesus and his followers of sedition and hostility (Luke 23:2; Acts 24:5). By living in ways that benefit their fellow citizens, Christ-followers *silence* false accusations. Their careful submission to civil authority aids the church's mission and protects the faithful. Peter assumes an overlap between the moral framework of believers and their presence within society.

What Do You Think?

If you and your church were suddenly removed from your community, would you be missed?

Digging Deeper

In what specific ways do you model right living and "doing good"? Share examples of upright behavior that "silence[s]" the "foolish."

B. Behaving Properly (vv. 16–17)

16. Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as God’s slaves.

This verse calls to mind what might be called a “spectrum of behavior.” At one extreme end of the spectrum stands “Legalism,” which stresses rule-keeping as the model behavior that best reflects on God. This position is refuted by Acts 15:1; Galatians 5:3; Colossians 2:20–23; etc. At the other extreme end of the spectrum stands “License.” This position as the model of behavior is refuted by Galatians 5:13; 2 Peter 2:19; etc. The proper view stands midway between the two extremes. It is called “Liberty.” *Freedom* is affirmed by John 8:34; Romans 6:14; 14:1–6; 2 Corinthians 3:17; Galatians 2:4; 5:1–13; etc.

What Do You Think?

Where do you land on the spectrum of Legalism, License, and Liberty?

Digging Deeper

How should Christians exercise their freedom (consider Romans 14:1–6 and Galatians 5:1–13)?

17. Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honor the emperor.

Peter concludes with a series of short exhortations. The four statements summarize the previous verses. Give honor to everyone, extend extravagant love to fellow believers, direct awe and reverence to God, and esteem governmental leaders.

The Highest Respect

African students highly respect the title and position of *teacher*. They treat teachers the way North Americans treat doctors. This took some adjustment when I began instructing asylum seekers from Africa. I was used to the (very low) level of respect I received as a high school teacher.

One way my international students show respect is in the title they give me. They call me *Teacher*. This is not because they do not know my name; they call me Teacher because they respect my position. To their way of thinking,

my authority is worthy of the utmost honor. If the class gets loud, some students demand respect on my behalf; this never happened in my high school classes!

When we conceptualize all authority as originating from God’s design, we may honor and respect the positions held even if we do not agree with all of the decisions made. What are some ways you can be better at giving honor and respect to those in authority? How might this give glory to God?
—B. R.

Conclusion

A. The Highest Authority

As citizens of God’s kingdom, we owe allegiance to God above all. Where a government’s laws conflict with God’s law, believers must follow God. Yet the God who created the world oversees and sanctions the nations. They exist at his discretion and derive their authority from him. Therefore, believers are also to submit to earthly governments. By obeying human leaders, Christ’s followers honor God, submit to his cosmic order, and strengthen their witness to those outside the church.

Citizens in Western democracies are blessed with “due process,” among other things. Such citizens have opportunities that ancient Christians could only imagine. But no matter the kind of government under which we live, Scripture’s commands remain the same: love and care for neighbors, resist evil, and model upright citizenship. Honor others, especially those in high positions, while loving all people well. In other words, reflect the character of God.

B. Prayer

Father God, teach us to balance life in this world with our citizenship in your kingdom. Guide us in your will as we fulfill our responsibilities to earthly authorities and fellow humans. In so doing, may we be the fragrance of Jesus Christ on earth. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Respect the government, honor God.