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Submission to Civil Authorities (13: 1-7)
This is another passage hard for present-day readers to grasp or appreciate, for two reasons. The first is that it reflects a view of government that is totally foreign to those living on this side of the Enlightenment, and in particular of that political child of the Enlightenment, the American Revolution. The second is that the attitudes of submission and respect here inculcated have been used to justify totalitarian and wicked regimes and, in the eyes of most late twentieth-century readers, are dangerous attitudes to have toward any civil rule. In short, this passage carries with it the same negative associations for present-day readers as those other Pauline passages that deal with social realities no longer in practice or favor, such as the "tables of household ethics" in Col 3: 18– 4: 1 and Eph 5: 21– 6: 9.

In order to cut through some of these (very understandable) difficulties, it is necessary to take more than usual care with this passage, trying first to place it in its literary and cultural contexts, then clarifying its instructions, and finally assessing its hermeneutical implications (see also E. Käsemann, "Principles of Interpretation of Romans 13," in New Testament Questions of Today [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969] 196-216).

The resemblance to the tables of household ethics is not accidental. This passage belongs to the same category of Hellenistic moral discourse. Since the time of Xenophon, Plato, and Aristotle, philosophers had written tractates on household management (peri oikonomias), seeking to define moral responsibilities within the social order (see D. L. Balch, Let Wives Be Submissive: The Domestic Code in 1 Peter [SBLMS 26; Chico: Scholars Press 1981]). Throughout the Mediterranean world since the time of Alexander the Great (mid-fourth century BCE), that social order had been remarkably uniform. Its basic unit was the household (oikos), consisting of the "father of the family" (paterfamilias), his wife, their children, and various others: slaves, clients, retainers, friends. It was an extended rather than a nuclear family. In terms of power, authority ran from the top down, and in terms of dynamics, every lower order showed respect and submission to the upper levels: wife to husband, children to parents, slaves to masters, clients to patrons (see K. R. Bradley, Discovering the Roman Family [New York: Oxford University Press, 1991]). The same sort of basic structure also shaped the larger social order. In Paul's day, there were still city-states, but they were no longer the focus of identity the way they had been in classical Greece. Since Alexander, the Mediterranean world was dominated by empire, which in turn was envisaged in terms of a great household (oikoumenē) over which the emperor reigned supreme as imperial paterfamilias. Like the head of the family, the emperor was patron from whom all goods ultimately derived; like the head of the family, the emperor was owed respect, gratitude, and, above all, submission (see A. Wallace-Hadrill, ed., Patronage in Ancient Society [London: Routledge, 1989]).

For those of us on this side of the Enlightenment, it is critical to grasp something about the ancient world that is most strange to us. The very thing that we most take for granted, namely, that the social order is changeable and should be changed according to the will of its participants

(that governments exist by the consent of the governed), is a premise that would have been rejected as outlandish, not only in ancient Rome but also in virtually every nation before the revolutions in the West spawned by the Enlightenment. As children of revolution, in other words, we literally live within a different perception of the social world.

For Paul and his contemporaries, the idea of changing the given social order would have been unthinkable. The social order was as stable as nature. Indeed, it was considered "natural." This form of household had been in place for as long as anyone had a record (whether in Greece or ancient Israel). The form of the state (the empire) had existed (in Paul's time) for more than four hundred years— and, let us remember, would survive in the western Mediterranean for hundreds more years, and would carry on virtually unchanged in the eastern Mediterranean for fifteen hundred years. Yes, there were slave revolts; yes, there were wars of national revolt (like that soon to break out in Palestine); but to most these seemed like acts of impiety. Yes, some urban women had, on the basis of a slave population, gained greater freedom of movement and a limited range of options beyond the domestic, but whenever it was felt that the social fabric itself was tearing, there was cause for concern on every side. The social order of household and empire was "according to nature," just as heterosexual relations were. When Paul declares that ruling authority is under God, therefore, he is making— in that time and place— a completely unexceptional statement.

Historical criticism has done a great service by identifying these ancient social realities. Otherwise, present-day readers might think that the New Testament was revealing God's blueprint for the perfect family or the ideal state. We know, of course, that many people do read the New Testament just this way, often under the guise of taking the text seriously. In fact, however, to read the text that way is not to take it seriously enough. What New Testament writers such as Paul and Peter were doing in their remarks on households was the same thing a moralist such as Hierocles did in his work On Duties— attempting, within a given social order, to define the obligations imposed by that order on the person who wished to be virtuous. Such reflection was necessary because, despite the fact that everyone recognized the social order as natural, it was clear that some of its instruments were not: fathers could be vicious; emperors could be tyrants. Thus, Epictetus could recognize the empire's power to seize his body (and himself lived in exile), but he refused to submit to anyone the judgments of his mind.

Readers today should not, therefore, be shocked at the fundamentally conservative and positive view of the imperial state reflected in 1 Tim 2: 1-2; Titus 3: 1; 1 Pet 2: 13-16, and the present passage. Despite the fact that Jesus was executed under Pontius Pilate, the New Testament is remarkably free of rancor or resentment toward the empire. Early Christians may also have seen the Roman order as a refuge against the vagaries of local resentments and riots. Jews in Egypt turned confidently to the emperor for help when subjected to local abuse (see Philo, Against Flaccus; Embassy to Gaius). When Paul was arrested in Jerusalem, only appeal to Caesar enabled him to escape the plots of local Jewish opponents (Acts 25: 11).

At the time he wrote Romans, Paul probably saw the empire as the enabler of the Christian mission, and therefore as an instrument of God's will for the salvation of all humans. Rome was in fact remarkably tolerant of religious diversity among its many subject peoples, so long as these did not threaten Roman rule. This explains why Rome would protect Jews against local riots in Alexandria, yet carry out merciless war against Jews in Palestine. It was entirely a matter

of imperial control. As long as Christians appeared like diaspora Jews, they could enjoy the same sorts of protections as other recognized ethnic cults.

But there were also radical impulses within the Christian movement that potentially had larger social implications. To what extent could the idea of an egalitarian community (neither Jew nor Greek, neither male nor female, neither slave nor free, Gal 3: 28), be translated into social expression in the household or city before generating notice and repression? To what extent would Rome tolerate the sort of angry attack on the empire found in Revelation 17– 18? Writing to Christians in the imperial city, and knowing as he did Aquila and Priscilla, Paul was aware that Jews had only short years before been expelled from Rome, "at the instigation of Chrestus" (see Introduction), and perhaps wanted to make sure that his own mission (which he hoped would find a sponsor in that city) would not be perceived as one hostile to the imperial order, even though it had to do with Jews and this same "Chrestus."

But why does he take up the question of the empire at this precise place, disconnected from any other "household ethics"? The answer, I think, is to be found in the immediate context. As we have seen so often in this letter, something Paul says leads to the need for a clarification. Already in 1: 18, he had spoken of "God's wrath" being revealed against wrongdoers, and he showed how their sins brought grief upon themselves. Then, in 12: 19, he had forbidden Christians to take revenge on those who harmed them, telling them to "give place to the wrath" and telling them that God would take care of vengeance on those who hurt them. The question then arises, How is God's wrath to come against those who do the sort of public wrong that cries out for revenge, if Christians are themselves not to retaliate? This question leads Paul to the governing order and the role he sees it playing in God's plans.

Paul's instruction in 13: 1 and 13: 5 to "be submissive" is not, in light of this analysis, surprising. It is a recommendation that made perfect sense in a world where status and rank were so carefully defined and observed, and in which failure to be "submissive" in the appropriate circumstances could threaten the existence of the community. Nor would many have taken exception to Paul's assertion that "there is no authority except from God and those that exist have been instituted by God." There is some textual disagreement here: some manuscripts have apo (" from God"), while others have hypo (" by God"), but the basic meaning is the same, namely, God authorizes the given social system. For a comparable Hellenistic Jewish view, see the Wisdom of Solomon 6: 1-6, which, despite threatening punishment of rulers for unjust actions, begins with the recognition that: "your dominion was given you by the Lord, and your sovereignty from the Most High" (Wis 6: 3). From such a perspective, it also follows that resistance to the order of society is construed as resistance to God, which will incur punishment (Rom 13: 2).

Paul, however, goes beyond mere recognition of the social order as derived from God's authority. Like 1 Peter, he expresses a positive evaluation of the way in which the government actually functions. In short, the state rewards the good and punishes the wicked. If one does not want to fear the state, all one need do is be good (13: 3). Now any number of people through the ages would have good reason to challenge Paul's assessment. Many governments, however noble in structure, have been tyrannical and unjust in practice; far from rewarding the good and punishing the wicked, they have made a habit of doing the opposite. Paul's statements, in fact, are possible (and tolerable) only in a situation in which the rule of law is in fact basically benevolent. And for

all its excesses, the Roman state could be so regarded, particularly at the time Paul was writing. Certainly, Paul could not have made such statements if Christians had been persecuted by the state simply for being Christians. When the state— as already in the case of the Maccabean martyrs— demands ultimate allegiance to itself, then Paul's statements are simply wrong and must be identified as such.

Even more troublesome, however, is the fact that Paul goes a step further. He declares the governing authority to be a "minister of God" (diakonos tou theou) who has the job of "executing [God's] wrath on the wrongdoer" (13: 4). Paul himself may well have been both innocent and sincere in his assessment. It may have appeared to him that wicked people would also be illegal people and that the state could ferret them out. Thus, the state could do the work of "God's wrath" and allow the Christians not to practice revenge. He could not, I am sure, have envisaged a "Christian empire" that would use the same sword to eliminate its religious dissenters. But his statement does pave the way for a theocratic state (when Christianity becomes the official religion of the empire), and the use of the imperial "sword" (13: 4) to punish those "wrongdoers" who in a "Christian empire" are guilty only of having the wrong theology but must be eliminated as heretics for the good of the state.

Paul cannot be held responsible for his practical advice later being taken as divine revelation and as the basis for a Christian theology of the state. That is too much weight for a few words of contingent remarks to bear. The tragedy of Christian history both in the East and the West is that they have been made to bear that weight. Perhaps the most problematic aspect of passage is Paul's advice in 13: 5, "therefore one must be subject, not only to avoid God's wrath, but also for the sake of conscience (syneidēsis)." As I have noted, even conservative moralists such as Epictetus distinguished between societal obedience and internal consent. The conscience is precisely what no human authority can command. Paul's words, therefore, must be taken in their broadest possible application—" it is a matter of conscience to be a good and responsible citizen of the social order in which you find yourself"— if they are not to be taken as a frightening capitulation to authoritarianism. If by "on account of conscience" he means simply "because it's the right thing to do," that is one thing, but if he means "because one's conscience must submit to the will of the ruling authorities," then he is clearly wrong.

I think it safe to say that Paul does not here advocate submitting one's conscience to the ruling authorities, for that would contradict his insistence on the integrity of the individual's conscience in 1 Corinthians 8 and Romans 14. Therefore, the phrase "On account of conscience" must bear the broader sense I have suggested, "because it is the right thing to do." This becomes clearer when Paul specifies as an example the paying of taxes, although once more the religious coloration he gives this is startling to those of us convinced of the desirability of separating religion and the state: "the authorities are ministers of God attending to this very thing" (13: 6).

Paul's final statement in this passage is summary in character: "give to everyone who is owed," which is a fair epitome of the approach to social ethics in antiquity. Not the reform of the social order, but "doing what is required" (ta kathēkonta) within it. Paul enumerates as examples payment of three kinds: taxes, respect (or "fear"), and honor. In a word, Paul sketches the Christian's relation to the larger world in terms of a basic accommodation to its structures. The passage expresses no reservation as to the limits of such accommodation or where "conscience" might need to choose between what God wills and what the state demands.

What are the hermeneutical implications of Rom 13: 1-7 for present-day readers? In many ways, the issues are the same for this passage as for the other "domestic code" passages with which it is cognate.

1. It is a misreading to take Rom 13: 1-7 as the revelation of a distinctively Christian view of the state. It is no such thing. Paul is simply responding to a social order that, so far as he can see, is as "natural" as relations between the sexes. The contemporary perception that either one or the other could be changed was unavailable to him.

2. Just as it is important to recognize the time-conditioned and relative character of Paul's perception, so is it equally necessary to recognize that our own post-Enlightenment perspective on the state is also time-conditioned and relative. Our view of society is no more self-evidently "correct" than is Paul's. Just as we now think it is "natural" for people to have a choice of who governs, so did people up to the Enlightenment (and beyond!) think that society is most naturally governed from the top down.

3. The two perspectives can be usefully brought into conversation, together with all the other voices of the New Testament canon, of tradition and of experience, as present-day Christians sort through the appropriate way to align their commitment to a crucified and raised messiah with the reality of the larger social order. The value of a variety of voices in the conversation is precisely that they tell us two things simultaneously: that the problem is real and won't go away and that there are a number of legitimate ways of approaching it.

4. Just as Paul's perceptions can be read in a conservative fashion, so can they be read more radically to the opposite effect. If all civil authority is from God and ordered under God, then it equally follows that a civil authority that does not respond to God's will can be considered disqualified as a true authority, and so could be resisted "for conscience's sake." If, for example, a state, such as that in Germany under the Nazis, arrogated to itself ultimate powers over conscience or punished those who did no wrong except following their conscience, then, as Christians such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer concluded, "for conscience's sake" such a regime can be actively opposed.

5. Even when all that is said, Rom 13: 1-7 has had such a negative history of interpretation and has been put to such wrong use that it remains a passage that must be engaged with considerable delicacy and caution. Simply "reading it off the page" as a directive for life is to misread it and to distort it, for the world in which it made self-evident sense no longer exists and never can again.