

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 And Jesus answering said unto them, Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's. And they marvelled at him.

Romans 13:1, 6–8

1 Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God.

6 For for this cause pay ye tribute also: for they are God's ministers, attending continually upon this very thing.

7 Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honour to whom honour.

8 Owe no man any thing, but to love one another: for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law.

1 Peter 2:13–17

13 Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake: whether it be to the king, as supreme;

14 Or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well.

15 For so is the will of God, that with well doing ye may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men:

16 As free, and not using your liberty for a cloke of maliciousness, but as the servants of God.

17 Honour all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the king.



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Key Text

Jesus answering said unto them, Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's. And they marvelled at him.—Mark 12:17

p 274 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

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A. The Highest Authority

B. Prayer

C. Thought to Remember

p 275 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. |

p 274 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. [p 275](#) 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 that is at 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 strangers scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia” (1 Peter 1:1). By using the term “strangers,” 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. And Jesus answering said unto them, Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's. And they marvelled at him.

The conflict here is prompted by the question of whether or not it is “lawful to give tribute 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 p 276 on it, Jesus directs them to *render 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 every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God.

Paul addresses how believers should relate to earthly authorities (compare [Titus 3:1](#)). To be *subject unto* means to be ranked under another. We are to submit because *God* ordains all earthly *powers*. Just prior to this directive, Paul stresses the importance of believers living peaceably 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 ought to obey God rather than men” (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 better exemplify Christlike behavior in our attitude p
277 toward authority? How can we serve others well regardless of who is in power?

—B. R.



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.”

B. Payment of Debt (vv. 6–7)

6. For for this cause pay ye tribute also: for they are God’s ministers, attending continually upon this very thing.

The double *for* may be considered “this is also” or “for because.” It sets up Paul’s reasoning. To find the antecedent of *this cause*, we look to the verses just before the one at hand. Paul states that governing powers serve the populace by upholding “good” behavior and punishing “evil” (Romans 13:3–4). Then he appeals to the reader’s conscience (13:5). Since the governing authorities *are God’s ministers*, then shouldn’t one’s conscience require that they be supported? The fact that they do their jobs on a full-time basis (the sense of *attending continually upon this very thing*) further buttresses Paul’s line of thought.

Tribute refers to taxes. 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 *ministers* is different from the word translated “minister” 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 “ministers” 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. Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honour to whom honour.

The big picture here concerns how to act on one’s debts (which is the sense of the word *dues*). Paul approaches this topic in terms of four categories. The first is *tribute*, which refers to direct taxes (compare Luke 20:22; 23:2). The second category is *custom*, which relates to custom duties and fees, or what may be called indirect taxes. Secular authorities require taxes to function.

Leadership positions deserve the deference inherent in the words *fear* and *honour*, the last two categories. In the Old Testament, *fear* 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](#)). *Honour* 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 “fear” and “honour”?

Digging Deeper

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

p 278 C. Fulfillment of Law (v. 8)

8. Owe no man any thing, but to love one another: for he that loveth another hath 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 *another*. 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 to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake.

Writing from Rome, Peter calls believers to respectful citizenship. His directive is truly remarkable, given the persecution by Nero at the time (see [Lesson Context](#)). Even so, Peter emphasizes the authority of governmental directives by stating that the people should obey *every ordinance* (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 it be to the king, as supreme; Or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well.

Following the general instruction of the previous half-verse, Peter names two offices of earthly authority. First, the *king, as supreme* refers to whoever rules as the overarching authority. As Peter writes, that person is Nero in Rome. 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 *evildoers* (compare [Romans 13:3–5](#)). A congenial by-product of living a law-abiding life is the resulting *praise of them that do well*. Such praise 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 so is the will of God, that with well doing ye may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men.

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 "well doing"? Share examples of upright behavior that "silence[s]" the "foolish."

p 279 B. Behaving Properly (vv. 16–17)

16. As free, and not using your liberty for a cloke of maliciousness, but as the servants of God.

This verse calls to mind what might be called a "spectrum of behavior." At one extreme end of the spectrum stands "Legalism," which stresses rulekeeping 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." *Liberty* 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 liberty (consider [Romans 14:1–6](#) and [Galatians 5:1–13](#))?

17. Honour all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the king.

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.

p 280 Involvement Learning

Enhance your lesson with KJV Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the KJV Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).

Into the Lesson

Write the title *Government* on the board and then add two columns labeled *Times I'm Grateful* and *Times I'm Frustrated*. Divide class members into groups of four to six members and say, "Brainstorm a list of specific times you are grateful for the government and times you are frustrated by the government." After calling time, ask volunteers to share their group's ideas with the whole class.

Alternative. Draw a continuum on the board with the word *Adversary* at one end and *Friend* at the other. Add the number zero under "Adversary," one through three between the terms, and four under "Friend." Ask class members to think about their feelings regarding the government. Then ask, "Where would you place yourself on this continuum?" Record participants' answers by placing their names along the continuum and then ask, "Why do you place yourself there?"

Alternative. Distribute copies of the "Obey the Government?" exercise from the activity page, which you can download. Have learners work in small groups to complete as indicated.

Lead into the Bible study by saying, "Today let's consider how [Mark 12:17](#); [Romans 13:1, 6–8](#); and [1 Peter 2:13–17](#) ask us to respond to government."

Into the Word

Ask learners to divide into groups of three or four—hand out notebook paper and pens. Ask volunteers to take turns reading [Mark 12:17](#); [Romans 13:1, 6–8](#); and [1 Peter 2:13–17](#) out loud. Then instruct groups to write two “Standards of Conduct” documents—one for governing officials and another for citizens under jurisdiction. Ask learners to include verse references and specific phrases from today’s texts as part of their standards.

Option. Extend the conversation in the same groups. Distribute a handout (you create) with the following prompts and questions for small-group discussion: Consider [Mark 12:17](#). 1—What did Jesus mean when He differentiated between “things that are Caesar’s” and “things that are God’s”? 2—Do you think Jesus means that Christians should pay taxes even when those taxes support activities or initiatives contrary to Christian belief? Why or why not? Consider [Romans 1:8](#) and [1 Peter 2:16–17](#). 3—Why did Paul and Peter add these instructions? 4—How might obeying these directives make it easier to obey specific governmental instructions? More challenging? 5—Can the government do anything to make obeying the apostles’ instructions impossible? 6—Consider your actions and attitudes toward elected officials. How are Christians to conduct themselves?

When time is up, invite a representative from each group to share their “Standards of Conduct” documents. Record common ideas among the groups. Discuss unique responses.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “What Is a Believer to Do?” exercise from the activity page. Have learners work in small groups to complete as indicated.

Into Life

Invite the class to brainstorm a list of government officials by name. Include local, regional, and national leaders. Write the list on the board.

Divide learners into pairs and distribute index cards and pens. Ask pairs to choose three or four names from the board and write specific petitions for them. Ask pairs to pray together quietly for their list.

Conclude the session by praying out loud as a class for the governmental positions and leaders you identified. Begin by asking a volunteer to open your prayer time. Then instruct learners to pray aloud as they feel led and comfortable. Let them know you will

close. Challenge learners to continue their prayers for these leaders throughout the week.

To print the reproducible activity page, simply click the highlighted text below to create a pdf file on your hard drive. Then open the pdf file in Acrobat Reader and print.

[Activity Page \(April 12: Authority: Belonging to God\)](#)
