

Activate | Week 3

Romans 13:1–14

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In this series we're asking, what does it mean to “activate” our faith? What does it look like to live out our allegiance to Jesus in day to day life?

The way we live reflects what we really believe, not just what we say we believe. After all, Christianity is not just some philosophical system or set of abstract ideas, but an embodied faith empowered by the Holy Spirit. As believers, we don't just nod thoughtfully in agreement with Jesus' teachings, but worship, follow, and obey him as our Savior and Lord.

As we delve into the last five chapters of Romans, we are considering how Paul's instructions to the 1st century Roman church apply to us in the 21st century. He was writing to a very different world, but the underlying issues he addresses resonate deeply in any age. How should the followers of Jesus relate to each other and to those in the surrounding culture? How should they see themselves in relation to their society's system of government? How should they act in the present, in light of what Jesus has promised for the future?

This week we'll listen for what the Spirit has to tell us through Paul.

Day 1

If you read from Romans 12:9 through 13:14, Romans 13:1–7 might feel like a bit of an interruption. Paul starts with “Love must be sincere” in Romans 12:9, and then explores what that love looks like in the body of Christ and between believers and those in the larger society. He will pick back up with the command to love one another again in Romans 13:8. In the middle are some instructions on living under the power of imperial Rome.

As you read through chapter 13, consider why Paul may have included these instructions between two commands to love. Also consider why Paul may have reminded believers of Jesus' immanent return starting in verse 11.

If you have time, go back and read Romans 12:9–21 again and see if you detect a flow in Paul's thought.

Read the Word

Romans 13:1–14 (NIV)

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. ² Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. ³ For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended. ⁴ For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. ⁵ Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience.

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. ⁹ The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery," "You shall not murder," "You shall not steal," "You shall not covet," and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." ¹⁰ Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.

¹¹ And do this, understanding the present time: The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. ¹² The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. ¹³ Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. ¹⁴ Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh.

- What do you notice about the flow of Paul's thought? How do you see these paragraphs relating to each other?

Reflect

There is a lot packed into fourteen verses! What is standing out to you the most? As Christians we are challenged to live as those who have been saved and set free from the power of sin and death and given the Spirit to live at peace with God and others. In these verses, Paul draws for us another sketch of what that kind of life looks like — of what it includes and what it resists.

In the passage you just read, what stands out to you? What do you have questions about?

Pray that as you delve deeper into these verses this week, the Spirit will use them to renew your mind and impact your actions.

Pray

If it's helpful, use the following to begin your own prayer time with God.

Father, your ways are right and good. I want to walk with you and live according to your Word. Fill me with your Spirit. Renew my mind. Show me what it means for me to submit to my governing authorities and love my neighbor as myself.

Day 2

In ancient Rome, declaring anyone but Caesar was Lord was risky, yet Paul and his fellow Christ-followers boldly proclaimed that a crucified Jew from Galilee is the ultimate and eternal Lord. Paul was determined to announce the reign of the true King in spite of opposition from Jewish and Roman authorities, yet he did not call for an earthly revolution.

In fact, Paul had the opposite advice for the Christians who lived in the shadow of the mighty Roman empire: submit to the governing authorities. Yet by insisting that there was an authority higher than Caesar, Paul was once again announcing the supremacy of God.

Read the Word

Romans 13:1–7

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. ² Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. ³ For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended. ⁴ For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. ⁵ Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience.

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.

- What reasons does Paul give for submitting to the governing authorities?

Reflect

“As far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone” (Romans 12:18). According to Paul, the desire for peace and justice will lead to a respect for the governing authorities. Paul insists that the “authorities that exist have been established by God” (13:1) and that “the one in authority is God’s servant for your good” (13:4). For Paul, the government’s responsibility under God is to promote justice and order. By honoring the authorities placed over them, believers were honoring God.

Paul is not naïve; he knows that the Roman government is not a reliable source for justice, so his unwavering faith is in God as the one who “deposes kings and raises up others” (Daniel 2:21). Yet he recognizes the positive role earthly authorities can play in containing evil and promoting the good.

Punishing the wrongdoer is a responsibility of the government and Paul instructs Christians to obey those authorities, not just to avoid punishment, but also “as a matter of conscience” (13:5). This submission includes paying the taxes that support those who govern. Submitting to the government can be a means by which God ensures good is not overcome by evil (Romans 12:21) — not just for believers, but for all their neighbors as well.

Paul did not know at the time he was writing Romans how severe Christian persecution would become under Nero. Nor could he have imagined all the various systems of government under which believers would live. Today Christians in different parts of the world are navigating life under governments that rule justly to varying degrees. Yet for all of us who are called to be “living sacrifices” to God and resist being molded to the pattern of the world, we must remember that our primary allegiance is not to earthly rulers, but to our divine King. Our eternal passports are issued by the Kingdom of God, not our current nation. And our King would have us imitate his righteousness in our role as citizens.

How should Christians conduct themselves if their government is perpetrating evil rather than checking it? Throughout the centuries, corrupt leaders have used Romans 13:1–7 to silence opposition and compel compliance with laws that defy the ways of God. Churches in Nazi Germany preached Romans 13 in support of the Third Reich. Churches in the American South defended slavery with these verses. When political or religious leaders use Romans 13 as a strategy to gain unwavering and unquestioning compliance, Christians should think carefully about why they are resorting to this tactic.

Paul is not advocating absolute, blind obedience to the government. The apostles certainly tangled with the Jewish and Roman authorities on more than one occasion. Peter seems to sum up their posture toward those in power when he was ordered to stop teaching about Jesus, “We must obey God rather than human beings!” (Acts 5:29). Nevertheless, Paul is

expecting Christ's followers to live as good citizens under the authorities that God has placed over them for the sake of conscience. Knowing how to respond to an unjust or God-defying law requires the Spirit's wisdom and discernment in light of all that the Bible commands.

According to Paul, because the government is "God's servant," it is ultimately accountable to God. "The real power to be respected is God's. Government therefore has God-given responsibility for the good."¹ In nations where citizens have a say in their own governance, Christians have been given the privilege and obligation to encourage that good. As we participate in the political process, we should do so to promote the ultimate Christian value, loving our neighbors as ourselves.

Echoing Jesus' teaching to "give to Caesar the things that are Caesar, and the things that are God's to God" (Matthew 22:21), Paul reminds the Roman churches of their obligation to their earthly rulers while the rest of Romans insists that their worship and allegiance belong to Jesus Christ, the Lord. Until he returns, Christians will live under governments that are just to varying degrees. But our ultimate hope is not in government, but in Jesus.

- What is your attitude toward government? How does Paul's message shape that attitude? How can you see your role as a citizen in light of what Paul teaches us in Romans?

Pray

If it's helpful, use the following to begin your own prayer time with God.

Jesus, you are my Lord. My primary allegiance is to you. Show me what it means to be a good citizen. Show me how I can promote your goodness and justice in the way I participate in the political process. I want to make a difference in my community and nation as I seek to love my neighbors as myself.

Day 3

As we've moved through our study of Romans, we've seen Paul insist that people, both Gentiles and Jews, are brought into a right relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ. Because they were insisting that Gentile believers follow the Torah, he wants the Jewish Christians in Rome to see the Mosaic law in a different light. Keeping the Torah is not what makes someone a part of God's covenant family. God's love poured out through Christ's sacrifice reconciles us to God.

¹ Thomas Hoyt, "Romans," *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary*, Edited by Blount, B. et al (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 271.

Our relationship with others is also guided and enabled by love. Paul sums up the Old Testament commandments that dictate our treatment of others by instructing us to love.

Read the Word

Romans 13:8–10

⁸ Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law. ⁹ The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery,” “You shall not murder,” “You shall not steal,” “You shall not covet,” and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” ¹⁰ Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.

- Paul contends that loving one’s neighbor as oneself sums up the other commandments that he lists. How? What is Paul’s reasoning?
- How does he transition from talking about believers’ relationships to the Empire to their relationships with other people?

Reflect

How do you define love? The passionate, romantic love of movies and novels often comes to people’s mind, but that’s only one expression of love. The kind of love that Paul is talking about is what Jesus demonstrated in his life and death — a relentless pursuit of the good of another, even at great cost to oneself. This kind of love is selfless, self-giving, and radically different from the “pattern of this world” (Romans 12:2) which often evaluates relationships based on “what’s in it for me.”

Roman society was built on a patronage system. If someone showed you financial or social favor, you were obliged to reciprocate in kind. It was not uncommon for Roman households to go bankrupt in an attempt to pay these debts of honor. Paul plays on this language of patronage to shift the conversation among Roman believers from the pursuit of honor and status and to the pursuit of Christlike love.

In his earthly life, Jesus displayed the love of God for all the world to see. He showed what God’s love looks like when it is embodied. It is the kind of the love that God has always desired people to give to one another. Love is the motivation behind the ancient commandments that God revealed to Moses to guide human relationships.

In Romans 13:9 Paul lists four of these commandments that show how God’s people are to treat others. If you love someone you will protect their life and respect their property. You will be happy when they are blessed with good things and not covet what’s theirs. If you love your spouse, you will cherish them and not cheat on them. Love doesn’t selfishly pursue its own desires at another’s expense. It wants their best. To love and be loved sums up God’s design for human relationships.

Because of how Paul spoke about the law, some of the Jews in Paul's day accused him of encouraging immoral living. If you tell people that they don't have to follow the Torah, how could they live holy lives? But like Jesus, Paul is actually setting the bar higher. Jesus asks for more than merely keeping the letter of the law. It's not enough to avoid killing, stealing, coveting, or cheating. The standard for Christians goes beyond "do no harm." Jesus's followers are called to love sacrificially and extravagantly, just like he does. We are called to relentlessly pursue the good of another, even if it costs us.

- It's hard to love like Jesus calls us to love. Is there someone in your life who you are finding it challenging to love? Spend some time praying about your struggle. Ask the Spirit to guide you.

Pray

If it's helpful, use the following to begin your own prayer time with God.

Jesus, on the cross you demonstrated your extravagant love for me. I want to be so secure in your love and so satisfied in you that I can selflessly pour out love to others. Teach me how.

Day 4

When you live in a world that is tainted by sin, you can't help but be affected by sin. In Paul's language, we become enslaved by it. Our culture's sins become our own. Part of breaking free from the pattern of this world is recognizing those patterns and then resisting them in the Spirit.

In this final section of Romans 13, Paul names some of the sins common to ancient Rome. They are not uncommon in modern America. Notice the explanation he gives for why and how we should escape those sins.

Read the Word

Romans 13:11–14

¹¹ And do this, understanding the present time: The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. ¹² The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. ¹³ Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. ¹⁴ Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh.

- In this passage, Paul uses vivid words and metaphors that stir the imagination. What do you notice?

Reflect

When was the last time you woke up well before your alarm went off because something good was happening that day and you needed to get ready for it? I often have that experience before a trip or because extended family is coming to visit. I wake up excited and ready to tackle my “to-do” list because I can’t wait for what comes next.

Paul uses the analogy of waking up to depict how we should live in light of Christ’s return. The night is long and dark. We’ve been frightened and lost. Sin has reigned over us in the darkness, but the dawn is breaking. We don’t know precisely when Jesus is coming back, but we know that his return is sooner than it was yesterday, so let’s get ready! Let’s live as people of the light.

Notice what Paul tells us to put on, even as we step into the light. The first light of a new day is dawning, but the battle with the darkness isn’t completely over. We have to put on our armor to guard ourselves against the sin that still seeks to control us. While Paul is absolutely convinced that in Christ we are free from sin’s dominion, he recognizes that our flesh is still susceptible to its influence. Putting on Christ shields us.

Jesus is the light of the world. He is our champion. He has defeated sin and death. He has come and will come in victory. When we accept his saving work by faith and offer him our allegiance as Lord, we have put on Christ. Galatians 3:26–27 says, “So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.” Yet, we have to continually remind ourselves who we are in Christ to resist the patterns of this world.

Sin habits often begin with thought habits. Paul tells us not to *think* about gratifying the desires of the flesh. Don’t dwell on the things that live in the darkness, don’t fantasize about them, or make plans to indulge them. Let’s seek to renew our minds. Let’s stop before we indulge in sins that are contrary to the love we should have for God and for others. Let’s think about how our sin impacts our relationship with God and with the people around us.

In 1 Thessalonians 5:6–8, Paul makes a similar point to the one he is making here, only he more specifically defines the “armor of light”:

So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be awake and sober. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet.

Let’s put on faith that our God is who he says he is and will do what he says he will do, genuine love that is received from a gracious God and poured out for the good of others, and hope that

is anchored and secure in our eternal salvation and eagerly anticipating Christ's return. This armor will allow us to live in the light and resist the darkness.

- Paul lists several specific types of sin that were common in ancient Rome. Are any of them common in your world?
- Be honest with yourself and God. Are you susceptible to any of those sins? How might those sins hurt your relationship with God or with other people? How can you fight those sins? Do you need help from friends, family, or other resources?

Pray

If it's helpful, use the following to begin your own prayer time with God.

Father, I want to clothe myself with Jesus and walk in the light. Strengthen my faith, pour out your love, and give me hope. Spirit, renew my mind. I confess my sins to you. Thank you for forgiving me and giving me strength to live differently.

Day 5

Happy Friday! I pray that you have been reminded of God's goodness and love this week as you've worked through Romans 13. Give yourself some time to reflect on God's Word. Be attentive to the Spirit and pray.

Reflect on what you've learned

In Romans 12 we learned that as we are being transformed by the Spirit, we will renew our minds. We should have a Spirit-renewed perspective. How do the instructions that Paul gives in Romans 13 reflect that perspective as we think about how we should relate to one another and our government?

Make Connections

To live as Paul describes in Romans 13 takes tremendous faith. To reach out wide and extend ourselves in love for the sake of others will expose us and make us vulnerable. Denying ourselves to pursue the good of another will cost us something. In our crazy political climate, submitting ourselves to our governing authorities can feel scary. Discerning what leaders we should support and how we should vote is daunting. Yet, Paul would encourage in all that.

For twelve chapters of Romans, Paul has shown us the faithfulness of God. The gospel reveals his righteousness — his determination to right his creation because he is righteous and his desire to bring people into a right relationship with himself. Out of

his great mercy, God has sent his Son to save us, redeem us, and reconcile us to himself and each other.

Consider all that Romans has proclaimed:

- the gospel is power of God for salvation (1:16)
- the righteousness of God is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe (3:22)
- Jesus was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life so we could be right with God (4:25)
- since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ (5:1)
- our old self was crucified with Christ so that we should be no longer slaves to sin (6:6)
- we are led by the Spirit and are the children of God (8:14)
- we can never be separated from the love of God (8:39)
- God's mercy does not depend on human desire or effort (9:16)
- Christ is the culmination of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes — Jew and Gentile (10:4)
- those who trust in Jesus will never be put to shame (10:11)
- We have been gifted by the Spirit to build up others (12:6)

We can trust the God that Paul exalts in Romans. Our faith is not in vain. We can trust him enough to yield to his Spirit and let him show us what it really means to love others as we love ourselves.

Pray and consider your next step

God will speak to us through his Word and renew our mind. Here are a few questions to get you thinking about how you might pray and respond based on Romans 13.

- How has your view of government been challenged? Pray for the Spirit's guidance in how you should think and talk about politics, especially as the 2020 election heats up.
- How have you been challenged to love this week? Pray for the Spirit to so fill you with his love that you can love others.
- How should the reminder that Christ is returning shape your thoughts and actions? Confess your temptations and sins and invite the Spirit to transform you.
- What else is on your mind? Is there anything you'd like to talk over with your small group?