

Life Group Questions

April 28th, 2024

Citizens of the World – Mel Fehr – **Romans 13:1-7**

Note from Pastor Jonathan

Hey Life Groups,

I have a few short things to bring up.

First, the Life Group season is coming to a close soon as summer fast approaches. Let me know how God's been working in your groups! Email me any testimonies. It can be about how people are going deeper with their time with God, people stepping up to serve, new serving opportunities, or any other way God's been working. Let's celebrate what He's doing.

Second, we have some events coming up. We have a Life Group Leader dinner on May 17, Women's Gathering on May 4 (<https://willingdon.org/events/womens-gathering/>), student baptisms (HOORAY!) and Food Drive on May 5, and You Can Counsel on May 11 (<https://willingdon.org/events/you-can-counsel-basic-training-for-helping-those-who-are-hurting/>). I hope you all will be blessed by these.

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OPENING QUESTIONS (Pick 2 or 3)

1. What makes authority easy or hard to obey?

To be subject to is ὑποτάσσω (hoop-ot-as-so), meaning to be **submissive**. It's the same word Paul uses for Christians to submit to each other, wives to submit to their husbands, and the church to submit to Jesus (Ephesians 5:21, 22, 24).

Here are two ideas I had.

Shared Values. It's easy to obey laws against murder because you also think murder is bad. (You do think murder is bad, don't you?) But it's harder when you don't agree. Mennonite Brethren are known for nonviolence (MB Confession of Faith, Article 13). What do you do when called to fight a war?

How It Affects Me. There's B.C. short-term rental legislation starting in May (<https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/housing-tenancy/short-term-rentals>). People who own listings on AirBnB or VRBO are unhappy, but others looking for a place to rent are generally happy, looking forward to more units on the market.

2. Is it ever okay to disobey authority?

Should we always obey what the government says or are there exceptions? Draw on some historical and biblical examples. What made their actions justified or not?

3. Which is the harder to give: taxes or respect/honor?

Are your taxes done? A lot of us are daydreaming about what we could have done if we kept our taxes. Or maybe we're proud of doing our civic duty since our various taxes pay for our infrastructure, firefighters, schools, parks, healthcare, and more. Even then, a lot of us probably still wish the government could use our money better.

TV news often portrays people in one of two camps: our prime minister/premiere/MP is the savior we need or the devil incarnate. Most of us probably fall somewhere in the middle, acknowledging the good and bad. Can we still give them respect and honor when they're bad?

4. What kinds of leaders do you struggle to give honor and respect?

Are there any types of policies or character issues that affect how you see them? What lines do you draw? For example, do you look at their policies and ignore their personal lives? What areas are you willing to ignore? Do ends justify means?

Romans 13:1-7

¹ Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.

² Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.

³ For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, ⁴ for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer.

⁵ Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. ⁶ For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. ⁷ Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.

LET'S DIG IN

5. What do we give to authority and why?

Paul tells the Christians in Rome to pay taxes and give honor.

Taxes. Paying taxes to a non-God-following government was an issue back in Jesus' time. One group (the Herodians) believed they should give money to Rome while another (the Pharisees) wasn't so happy about it. Then you had the Zealots, who were anti-Roman terrorists. Jesus says that since their coins had Caesar's image on them, Caesar owns it and the people should give Caesar what he wants. Since they were God's image (Genesis 1:27), they should give themselves to God (Matthew 22:15-22).

Paul notes the benefits of governments (which are funded by taxes). In last week's passage, Paul says never to take revenge because revenge is God's job (Romans 12:19). Here he writes that the government is God's servant because it "carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer" (Romans 13:4). We don't take justice into our own hands, because God uses the government to do justice. Sorry, Batman.

Check out **Pax Romana** in the NOTES for other ways the Roman government helped Christianity.

I know it's not all perfect, but what benefits do we receive as Christians by paying taxes? It's not always obvious. Our taxes pay for roads to drive to church. Our schools teach our children so they can read their Bibles. We have beautiful, publicly maintained parks to meet for fellowship. Food safety inspectors make it safe for us to meet with people at cafes to pray and catch up. It ain't all bad!

Respect and Honor. Being unhappy with political leaders is nothing new. You've probably seen a lot of car decals with (A CERTAIN EXPLICATIVE) TRUDEAU. In the States, many people have similar messages on their cars, but with BIDEN. I'm not here to debate whether or not these leaders are good or bad. That's also not what this passage is about. But Paul does tell his readers (and us) to treat our leaders with respect and honor. (Take a look at PERSECUTION in the NOTES to see what kind of leader Christians had to respect.)

The Bible has multiple examples of God raising evil leaders to demonstrate his power, like Pharaoh (Exodus 9:16), or punish His people, like Shalmaneser (2 Kings 18:9-12) or Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 1:1-2). What's amazing to me is that faithful, godly people treated ungodly, evil rulers with respect. Even after Saul keeps hunting David, David still addresses Saul as "my lord the king" (1 Samuel 24:8). Daniel greets Darius with "Long live the king" (Daniel 6:21), even though he *just* put Daniel in the lion's den. When Paul met with different rulers, he always showed respect (e.g., Acts 24:10). Prophets called out evil kings, but name-calling and insults aren't normally part of it (e.g., Matthew 14:3-4). They spoke with respect.

Paul even uses his defense to share his testimony with Agrippa, hoping for him to become Christian (Acts 26:28-29). I think that's the key. Paul knows it's by grace that he knows Jesus and Agrippa doesn't. It's by God's grace and mercy that we know God when many of our leaders don't. And our desire should be like Paul's, that they know Jesus. When we show respect and honor, we earn chances to be witnesses. I can't imagine putting up signs with profanity or name-calling would encourage those leaders to listen to what we have to share.

6. How can we work with the government to promote good?

In Jesus' time, people tried to follow God in different ways. The Sadducees were pretty cool with compromise and doing whatever to gain status and wealth. The Pharisees wanted to not let Roman influence pollute them. Then there were Zealots. "What made the [Zealot] "philosophy" different from

other Pharisees and Pharisee-influenced Jews was that its members were radically committed to direct action, killing and being killed for the name of Yahweh. Other Pharisees took a passive view of Gentile evils in their midst, seeing them as the judgment of the Lord upon the people, evils that were to be patiently borne until the Last Day, when *God* would avenge his people.” (*Jesus & the Rise of Early Christianity*, 136).

Here are some suggestions.

Learn the Issues. Learn why the government is doing it and why. Learn what the Bible says about it. I’ve seen Christians jump to conclusions and act impulsively. It always leads to unnecessary anger, suffering, and strife on both sides.

We can take the pandemic as an example. The government restricted churches from gathering. At first, I was fine meeting online, but after weeks turned into months, I hated it. Many churches fought the government and I get it. But I noticed many loud voices were willfully ignorant of what was going on.

A pastor in Edmonton became famous by flouting rules and giving misinformation about the pandemic (<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/gracelife-church-defies-closure-order-again-exceeding-capacity-rcmp-1.5904976>). He completely ignored the fact that mass gatherings put peoples’ lives at risk, the medical system was overwhelmed, and lots of people were dying. Sadly, I saw a lot of other Christians call the pandemic a hoax, pushed against proven safety measures, and promoted horse de-wormer as a cure (<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/01/us/marcus-lamb-dead.html>). Yes, we want to meet in person, but we also need to understand our context.

There was also a distortion of God’s Word. When vaccines were rolling out, many Christians declared them as the mark of the beast. I found a good article by a pastor writing to his church about how they aren’t: <https://www.messiahchurch.ca/blog/are-vaccinations-the-mark-of-the-beast>. People said that taking a vaccine was not trusting God because God ultimately keeps us safe. But by that logic, we don’t need seatbelts, building codes, certifications to fly airplanes, or lock our doors. God provides us with means for safety, but we can still trust in Him.

Many Christians also thought following God meant being loud and bombastic when God calls us to speak truth in love (1 Corinthians 13:1-3).

Live Right. The Canadian government is very pro-gender and sexual fluidity. Although many people tout a very low (1% or lower) rate of regret or detransitioning, there simply isn’t enough quality evidence to back that up and there’s a long list of harms (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC10322769/>).

... when someone regrets, detransitions, or discontinues medical intervention for gender dysphoria, serious consequences from medical intervention frequently remain, often for life. These can include sterility (Cheng et al., 2019), loss of breasts, irreversibly harmed genitals and/or sexual function, and lifetime dependence upon medication due to gonad removal, as well as loss or growth of hair, voice changes, and breast growth. Detransition can also incur detrimental social consequences: many in the Vandebussche (2022) study “expressed a feeling of rejection and loss of support in relation to their decision to detransition, which lead (sic) them to step away from LGBT + groups and communities” (p. 1611). That is, not only might their gender dysphoria not be resolved, but the medical harm they incurred in order to try to resolve it and the consequences of detransition or feeling regret may create additional, sometimes devastating, challenges. In one convenience sample of detransitioners who identified as such, 60% reported needing help in learning to cope with feelings of regret (Vandebussche, 2022). In another convenience sample, comprised of those who medically detransitioned, almost two-thirds “indicated that if they knew then what they know now, they would

not have chosen to transition” (Littman, 2021, p. 3364). Negative outcomes can be extremely painful, and cause long-term suffering: “Some of us will now never be able to have children and many of us live with great distress and regret every day” (Fox, 2021). Knowing the number of those who discontinue, detransition, and/or regret is clinically crucial, but currently unavailable information.

We probably know Christians who spend a lot of time online, posting/tweeting/etc. angry diatribes. But Jesus said to get the plank out of our eye before we get the speck out of our brother’s (Luke 6:41-42) and Paul tells us to worry about Christians who are not acting Christian, leaving non-Christians up to God (1 Corinthians 5:12-13).

I grew up in the 80s and 90s when men were men! We would never tolerate a crybaby who writes poetry while playing a sissy harp (David), a smooth-skinned mama’s boy who stays at home doing woman’s work (cooking) while his sasquatchesque brother hunts (Jacob), a sober vegetarian (Daniel), a dude who lets people punch him without fighting back (Jesus). A man telling other men he loves them kinda’ comes off as ... you know (Jesus).

Don’t get me started on the women. You don’t want a woman with strong arms (Ruth). Women should leave politics (Deborah) and saving the world (Esther) to men.

I’m being facetious. But we need to deconstruct our views of gender and sex, tossing out what’s bad so we can properly reconstruct them on what God wants.

Let’s learn how to live as a woman or man in a God-honoring way that fulfills what He wants. Check out the upcoming **Women’s Gathering** as they study how to follow God’s commandments (<https://willingdon.org/events/womens-gathering/>) and the **Men’s Fellowship** as they study how to be men of integrity (<https://willingdon.org/events/mens-fellowship-discipline-of-integrity/>). We also have a **Marriage Workshop** run by Family Life Canada coming up (<https://willingdon.org/events/marriage-workshop-2024/>). If we live as God intended, we can show the world why God’s ways are best.

Use the Means You Have. Thankfully some legal provisions allow Christians to maintain their integrity. Although abortion is legal, the Canadian Medical Association says physicians shouldn’t be forced to recommend or perform abortions and can’t be discriminated against for doing so (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1268491/?page=1>). If you’re being pushed to do something by your authorities at work, you could bring up religious accommodation (<https://www.go2hr.ca/explore-all-resources/human-resources/employees-religious-needs-accommodate-them-or-face-costly-consequences>). If you’re being pressured into disobeying God, try to find a legal way to abstain.

We can also attack issues apolitically. Major reasons for abortions include the inability to afford to raise a child, an issue with their partner, or wanting to postpone motherhood (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5957082/>) We can help through financial support, giving them a community, providing childcare so they can continue their education, or offering to adopt. We can also provide love and comfort for women facing the trauma and guilt of having an abortion. Volunteer with at-risk children and youth so they will have a healthy (and hopefully holy) view of sexuality so any future pregnancies will be within a marriage. (I recently listened to this incredible podcast of a young girl growing up in over a dozen foster homes who became a single mother to a special needs child: <https://www.radiodiaries.org/melissas-diaries/>).

And last but not least, pray! Ultimately, we know that we are all sinners. We know better because of God’s grace in our lives. Without Him, we would be all over the place, too. So let’s pray that God would reveal Himself to our political leaders and our city. Pray for opportunities for Willingdon Church to share

the Gospel. Pray that God forgives them of their sins and makes them co-laborers so they will use their political positions to further His kingdom.

NOTES

ROMAN CONTEXT

Whatever opinion you may have of our current government, what we have would be a dream come true for the people reading Paul's letter. Here's a little bit of context.

Pluralistic and Immoral. The Romans worshipped all sorts of gods. There were the famous ones we're familiar with, such as Jupiter, Neptune, or Mars (<https://www.britishmuseum.org/blog/gods-and-goddesses-greek-and-roman-pantheon>). But there was an infinite number of gods that could be worshipped. While in Athens, Paul stumbled across an altar made for "the unknown god" (Acts 17:23). The Romans also had the Roman Imperial Cult, where emperors were identified (by senate vote) as gods that Romans officially worshipped as a state religion. Imagine voting on whether someone was a god.

Roman religion was all about doing rituals to make the gods happy. The gods didn't care how you lived your day-to-day life. As long as you did the rituals, they blessed your family, city, and empire. "So one could say that Roman religious practice guaranteed freedom of conscience. The Romans could think what they pleased of their gods and religion, though not during religious practice. They discussed it at meetings and in debates, they read books about religion. But that was a cultural activity of no religious import. *Problems arose only if they rejected the ancestral religious traditions of the city-State, family, neighborhood etc.*" (<https://booksandideas.net/Politics-and-Religion-in-Ancient>). Live how you want during the week, just don't mess with tradition because it makes the gods unhappy.

We see this as a concern when non-Jews who grew up in the Roman culture started becoming Christian. The early church leaders had to tell them to "abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality" (Acts 15:19-20). It may seem obvious to us, but they were very normal for the average Roman. This placed Christians outside of society. Later on, they would be heavily persecuted for not worshipping the emperor.

Persecution. Something that strikes me is Paul's timing. He wrote this letter around A.D. 57. In a few years, things got crazy bad for Christians. In A.D. 64, there was a big fire in Rome and people suspected Emperor Nero to be the culprit. He pinned the fire on Christians. They're the antisocial weirdos who don't practice civic duty and get involved in the rituals that keep Rome flourishing like the rest of us! Instead of worshipping the emperor and other gods, they worship some invisible guy named Christ. Nero brutally killed these Christians. I've bolded some parts for emphasis. You can see the pure hatred.

Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44 — Therefore, to scotch the rumour, Nero substituted as culprits, and punished with **the utmost refinements of cruelty**, a class of men, **loathed for their vices**, whom the crowd styled Christians. Christus, the founder of the name, had undergone the death penalty in the reign of Tiberius, by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilatus, and the **pernicious superstition** was checked for a moment, only to break out once more, not merely in Judaea, the home of the **disease**, but in the capital itself, where all things horrible or shameful in the world collect and find a vogue. First, then, the confessed members of the sect were arrested; next, on their disclosures, vast numbers were convicted, not so much on the count of arson as for **hatred of the human race**. And derision accompanied their end: **they were covered with wild beasts' skins and torn to death by dogs; or they were fastened on crosses, and, when daylight failed were burned to serve as lamps by night**. Nero had offered his Gardens for the spectacle, and gave an exhibition in his Circus, mixing with the crowd

in the habit of a charioteer, or mounted on his car. Hence, in spite of a guilt which had earned the most exemplary punishment, there arose a sentiment of pity, due to the impression that they were being sacrificed not for the welfare of the state but to the ferocity of a single man.

They weren't just guilty of setting a fire. Since they don't participate in Roman society, they must hate the human race! They've dedicated their hearts to betray humanity! That's such a wild accusation.

Imagine if our government rounded up members of Religion X and put them in BC Place. Tens of thousands of people came to see them executed. Some are burned alive so there's enough light to see others being killed and eaten by wild animals. All the while, the prime minister rides around on a golf cart, getting the crowd rowdy like a cheerleader. That sounds like a terrible post-apocalyptic movie, but that's what those Roman Christians would soon face.

Christian tradition also holds that Paul and Peter were both killed during Nero's reign. How would those Roman Christians feel re-reading this passage?

Pax Romana (Peace of Rome). Despite its problems, there was peace and overall unity in the Roman Empire. This provided several advantages to the spread of the Gospel. They built **roads** which made traveling much easier. No more trudging through mud and sketchy terrain. They also made travel relatively safe from crime. Since everyone was **united**, people could move around the empire to different people groups without worrying about borders (Acts 11:19-21). **Greek** became the common language, so Paul could easily preach in many different areas without learning local languages. Check out this article for more: <https://www.gotquestions.org/Pax-Romana.html>.

TODAY'S PERSECUTION

In Canada, we're receiving some significant pressure from the government to teach and promote beliefs that contradict what we believe. Some say that playing nice is over; it's time for a holy war. Others panic and despair as they see Christianity (and God, by extension) seemingly being overcome by evil (Matthew 16:18). But I think we should consider two things.

1. Persecution should be expected.

Men and women of God have faced persecution throughout history (Acts 7:52). Jesus and the apostles faced constant persecution. Paul writes to Timothy

2 Timothy 3:12-17 – Indeed, **all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted**, while evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse ... But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

Paul reminds Timothy that everyone who wants to follow Jesus will face persecution. Jesus tells us to rejoice when we face persecution because we're in the same boat as the prophets (Matthew 3:11-12).

Paul then tells Timothy to stick to the Scriptures. Timothy grew up learning about God's faithful followers who lived hundreds of years before Timothy's time. All of that was *still* true, relevant, and useful to Timothy. It's the same for us.

2. We should have a good perspective.

Yes, it's getting harder to be Christian, but our brothers and sisters are facing a much harder battle. I'm not sharing this because it's not an issue, but to keep our perspectives in check. I'm from the States and a lot of Christians call EVERYTHING persecution, including minor inconveniences.¹ So learning about what people are facing helps us differentiate between real suffering and small bothers. It also helps us see how we can trust God in the face of persecution.

Here are some videos about Christians being persecuted by their government.

Persecution Rising: North Korea Replaces Afghanistan at the Top of Open Doors –

Eritrea: North Korea of Africa — <https://youtu.be/sQ3YVbPfWgk>

Deadly Attacks Escalate Against Myanmar Christians — <https://youtu.be/i4CUqlvqM6k>

How this Peninsula Became Home to Megachurches and Labor Camps –
<https://youtu.be/M2V1Ew3eEwo?si=ozaMlvVWFbXvupjY>

¹ There's an annual war on Christmas, where Christians get riled up over people saying Happy Holidays. I could see a problem if Christians are forced to say Happy Holidays, but we aren't. The government and most companies are non-religious and cater to people who celebrate Christmas, Hannukah, Kwanza, Festivus, or simply days off. There's nothing to be gained from forcing non-Christians to say Merry Christmas. I don't think Christians would appreciate being forced to say Eid Mubarak or Happy Holi. And Jesus never told us to tell people Merry Christmas, so it's completely optional.

One of the silliest cases was when the Pentagon denied a jet flyover during a Christian rally back in 2009 (<https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/flyover-denial/>). I bet Paul would be so mad if Nero didn't fly jets over Christian celebrations!