CALVIN'S COMMENTARIES

The Epistles of Paul The Apostle
to the
ROMANS
and to the
THESSALONIANS

Translator
ROSS MACKENZIE

Editors
DAVID W. TORRANCE
THOMAS F. TORRANCE

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Let every soul be in subjection to the higher powers: for there is no power but of God; and the powers that be are ordained of God. Therefore he that resisteth the power, withstandeth the ordinance of God, and they that withstand shall receive to themselves judgment. (1-2)

1. Let every soul be in subjection. Paul's careful treatment of this passage in his instructions concerning the Christian life seems to have been forced on him by some great necessity, which the preaching of the Gospel was able to occasion in that age in particular, although at all times this is involved in it. There are always some restless spirits who believe that the kingdom of Christ is properly exalted only when all earthly powers are abolished, and that they can enjoy the liberty which He has given them only if they have shaken off every yoke of human slavery. This error, however, possessed the minds of the Jews more than others, for they thought it a disgrace that the offspring of Abraham, whose kingdom had flourished greatly before the coming of the Redeemer, should continue in bondage after His appearing. There was another thing, too, which alienated the Jews as much as the Gentiles from their rulers. These rulers not only all detested true godliness, but also persecuted religion with feelings of utmost hostility. It seemed absurd, therefore, to acknowledge as lawful masters and rulers those who were contriving to snatch the kingdom from Christ, the only Lord of heaven and earth. It is probable that these reasons led Paul to establish the authority of the magistrates with the greater care. He first of all lays down a general precept which briefly summarizes what he intends to say, and then adds further statements which help to explain and prove the precept.

He calls them higher powers, because they excel other men, rather than supreme, as though they possess the highest authority. Magistrates, therefore, are so called in relation to those who are subject to them, and not from any comparison between them. By using this expression Paul intended, I think, to remove the empty curiosity of those who often ask by what right those who are in authority came by their power. It ought really to be sufficient for us that they rule. They have not attained this high position by their own strength, but have been placed there by the hand of the Lord. By mentioning every soul Paul removes every exception, lest any should claim to be immune from the common submission to obedience.
For there is no power but of God. The reason why we ought to be subject to magistrates is that they have been appointed by God's ordination. If it is the will of God to govern the world in this manner, any who despise His power are striving to overturn the order of God, and are therefore resisting God Himself, since to despise the providence of the One who is the Author of civil government (iuris politici) is to wage war against Him. We should understand, furthermore, that the powers of magistrates are from God, not as pestilence, famine, war, and other punishments for sin are said to be from Him, but because He has appointed them for the just and lawful government of the world. Although dictatorships and unjust authorities are not ordained governments, yet the right of government is ordained by God for the well-being of mankind. Since, therefore, it is lawful to prevent war and to seek remedies for other evils, the apostle commands us freely and of our own account to respect and honour the right and authority of magistrates as being useful for mankind. The punishments which God inflicts on the sins of men may not properly be termed ordinances, but are the means which He purposely appoints for the preservation of legitimate order.

2. He that resisteth the power. Because no one can resist God without causing his own ruin, Paul warns that those who in this respect oppose the providence of God will not go unpunished. We must, therefore, take heed lest we incur this condemnation. By the word judgment I understand not merely the punishment which is inflicted by the magistrate, as if Paul had intended to say that those who resist authority would be justly punished, but also every act of God's vengeance, however He may exact it. Paul gives us a general picture of the end which awaits those who strive against God.

For rulers are not a terror to the good work, but to the evil. And wouldst thou have no fear of the power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise from the same: for he is a minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is a minister of God, an avenger for wrath to him that doeth evil. (3-4)

3. For rulers are not a terror to the good work. He now commends us to obey rulers on the grounds of their usefulness. The causative γάρ must therefore refer to the first proposition, and not to the last verse. The usefulness of rulers is that the Lord has designed by this means to provide for the peace of the good, and to restrain the waywardness of the wicked. In these two ways the safety of mankind is secured. Unless the fury of the wicked is opposed and the innocent protected from their wilfulness, there will be universal destruction. If this,
therefore, is the only remedy by which mankind can be protected from destruction, we ought to preserve it with care, unless we want to admit that we are the public enemies of the human race.

The words which Paul adds wouldst thou have no fear of the power? do that which is good, mean that we have no reason for fearing the magistrate if we are good. Indeed, he says, the very desire to shake off or remove this yoke from oneself is tacit proof of an evil conscience that is plotting some mischief. Paul, however, is here speaking of the true and natural duty of the magistrate, and although those who hold power often depart from this, we must still render them the obedience which is due to rulers. If a wicked ruler is the Lord’s scourge to punish the sins of the people, let us reflect that it is our own fault that this excellent blessing of God is turned into a curse.

Let us, then, continue to honour the good ordinance of God. This is easy to do, provided we impute to ourselves any evil which may accompany it. Paul, therefore, teaches us here the purpose for which the Lord has appointed magistrates. The effects of this will always be felt, unless this excellent and beneficial institution is corrupted through our own fault. Rulers, however, never abuse their power by harassing the good and the innocent without retaining in their despotic rule some semblance of just government. No tyranny, therefore, can exist which does not in some respect assist in protecting human society.

Paul has also noted here the two parts considered by philosophers also to constitute the well-ordered administration of a state, viz. the rewards given to the virtuous and the punishment inflicted upon the wicked. The word praise, according to Hebrew usage, is to be taken here in an extended sense.

4. For he is a minister of God to thee for good. Magistrates may learn from this the nature of their calling. They are not to rule on their own account, but for the public good. Nor do they have unbridled power, but power that is restricted to the welfare of their subjects. In short, they are responsible to God and to men in the exercise of their rule. Since they have been chosen by God and do His business, they are answerable to Him. But the ministry which God has committed to them has reference to their subjects. They have also therefore an obligation to them. Paul instructs individuals that it is by the divine kindness that they are defended by the sword of rulers against the injuries of the wicked.

For he beareth not the sword in vain. A second part of the function of magistrates is their duty to repress by force the insolent behaviour of the wicked, who do not willingly allow themselves to be governed by laws, and to inflict punishment on their offences as God’s judgment requires. Paul explicitly declares that magistrates are armed with
the sword not just for empty show, but in order to smite evildoers. *An avenger for wrath* means one who executes God’s wrath. Paul proves this from the use of the sword, which the Lord has delivered into his hand. This is a noteworthy passage for proving the right of the sword. If by arming the magistrate the Lord has also committed to him the use of the sword, then whenever he punishes the guilty by death, he is obeying God’s commands by exercising His vengeance. Those, therefore, who consider that it is wrong to shed the blood of the guilty are contending against God.

*Wherefore ye must needs be in subjection, not only because of the wrath, but also for conscience sake. For for this cause we pay tribute also; for they are ministers of God’s service, attending continually upon this very thing. Render to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honour to whom honour.* (5-7)

5. *Wherefore ye must needs be in subjection.* Paul now repeats briefly the command which he had given at the beginning concerning obedience to magistrates, but with this refinement, that they are to be obeyed not only on the grounds of human necessity, but also in order that we may obey God. By *wrath* he means the vengeance which magistrates can exact for contempt shown to their dignity. ‘We must not’, he says, ‘be obedient because we may not resist those who are armed and have greater power without being punished, in the same way as we generally bear injuries which we are unable to repel. Rather, we must voluntarily take upon ourselves the submission to which our conscience is bound by the Word of God.’ Even, therefore, if the magistrate were unarmed and it were lawful to provoke and despise him with impunity, we should no more attempt to do this than if we saw the threat of punishment hanging immediately over us. The individual does not have the right to deprive of his authority the one who is set in power over us by the Lord. The whole of this discussion concerns civil government (*de civilibus praefecturis*). Those, therefore, who bear rule over men’s consciences attempt to establish their blasphemous tyranny from this passage in vain.

6. *For this cause ye pay tribute also.* Paul takes the opportunity of mentioning tributes, and he bases his reason for paying tribute on the office of the magistrates. If it is their responsibility to defend and preserve uninjured the peace of the upright and to resist the impious attempts of the wicked, they cannot do this unless they are assisted by force and strong protection. Tributes, therefore, are paid by law to support such necessary expenses. This is not the proper place to enter into a fuller discussion concerning the manner of paying taxes or tributes, nor is it our concern either to prescribe to rulers how much
they ought to spend for individual purposes, or to call them to account. It is right, however, that they should remember that all that they receive from the people is public property, and not a means of satisfying private lust and luxury. We see the uses for which Paul appoints the tributes which are paid, viz. that heads of state may be furnished with assistance for the defence of their subjects.

7. Render to all their dues. It seems that the apostle's intention here is to summarize the particulars in which subjects have obligations to magistrates. They are to hold them in regard and honour, to obey their edicts, laws and judgments, and to pay tribute and taxes. By the word *fear* he means obedience, and by *custom* and *tribute* not simply customs duties and imposts, but other revenues also.

This passage confirms his previous statement that we ought to obey kings and all other governors, not because we are compelled, but because this is an obedience acceptable to God. He wants them not only to be feared, but also to be honoured by a respect which is freely offered.

**Owe no man any thing, save to love one another: for he that loveth his neighbour hath fulfilled the law.** For this, *Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not covet,* and if there be any other commandment, it is summed up in this word, *namely, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.* Love worketh no ill to his neighbour: love therefore is the fulfilment of the law. (8-10)

8. **Owe no man anything.** There are some who think that this remark is ironical, as though Paul were answering the objection of those who contended that Christians were burdened by having other precepts than that of love enjoined on them. I do not deny that it may be taken ironically, as though he conceded to the demand of those who admit no other law than that of love, but in a different sense. I prefer, however, to take the words in the simple sense, for I think that Paul meant to refer the precept concerning the power of magistrates to the law of love, so that no one might consider it weak. It is as though he had said, 'When I request you to obey rulers, I require only what all believers ought to perform by the law of love. If you wish the good to prosper (and not to wish this would be inhuman), you ought to strive to make the laws and judgments prevail, in order that the people may be obedient to the defenders of the laws, for these men enable us to enjoy peace.' To introduce anarchy, therefore, is to violate charity, for the immediate consequence of anarchy is the disturbance of the whole state.

**For he that loveth his neighbour hath fulfilled the law.** Paul's design is to reduce all the precepts of the law to love, so that we may know that
we are duly obeying the commandments when we are maintaining love, and doing so in such a way that we are prepared to endure any burden which may help to preserve charity. He thus fully confirms the precept which he has given concerning the obedience which we are to render to magistrates. This obedience constitutes not the least part of love.

Some, however, feel a difficulty in this passage from which they cannot quite escape. This is Paul's teaching that the law is fulfilled if we love our neighbour. He makes no mention here, however, of the worship of God, although he should not have omitted this. But Paul is not referring to the whole of the law. He is speaking simply of the duties which the law requires from us in regard to our neighbour. It is true, of course, that the whole law is fulfilled when we love our neighbours, for true love to men flows only from the love of God, and is the evidence and effect of this love. But Paul here mentions only the second table, for his inquiry related only to that. It is as if he had said, 'He who loves his neighbour as himself has performed his duty towards the whole world.' The objection of the sophists, who attempt to find justification by works in this verse, is futile. Paul is not stating what men do or fail to do, but speaks of circumstances which we will nowhere find to have been fulfilled. When we say that men are not justified by works, we do not deny that the observance of the law is true righteousness. But since no one performs the law, or has ever performed it, we maintain that all men are excluded from it, and that therefore our only refuge is in the grace of Christ.

9. For this, Thou shalt not commit adultery. We cannot infer from this passage what precepts are contained in the second table, since he also adds at the end, and if there be any other commandments. He has omitted the command which enjoins the honouring of parents. It may seem absurd that he should have disregarded a point which had the closest reference to his subject. But may the apostle not have passed it over in silence to avoid obscuring his argument? I would hesitate to assert this, however, for I see that he has stated all that he intended to prove, viz. that if by all His commandments God had no other purpose than to instruct us in the duty of love, we ought to strive to attain it in every way. The reader, however, who seeks no quarrel will readily acknowledge that by passages such as these Paul was desirous to prove that the object of the whole law is to encourage us to cultivate love for one another. We must supply what he passed over in silence, viz. that obedience to magistrates is not the least important way by which to cherish peace and preserve brotherly love.

10. Love worketh no ill to his neighbour. He proves from its effect that the word love contains the teachings which we are given in all of
these commandments. Those who are endowed with true love will
never think of injuring their brethren. The whole law forbids only
one thing—doing any harm to our neighbour. This, however, should
be related to Paul’s present purpose. Since magistrates are the guardians
of peace and equity, those who desire that every individual should
preserve his rights, and that all men may live free from injury, must
defend to the utmost of their power the order of magistrates. It is the
enemies of government who reveal their desire to do harm. Paul’s
repetition of the statement that love is the fulfilment of the law is to
be understood, as before, of that part of the law which refers to human
society. There is no allusion at all here to the first table of the law,
which deals with the worship of God.

And this, knowing the season, that now it is high time for you to awake
out of sleep: for now is salvation nearer to us than when we first believed.
The night is far spent, and the day is at hand: let us therefore cast off the
works of darkness, and let us put on the armour of light. Let us walk
honestly, as in the day; not in revelling and drunkenness, not in chamber-
ing and wantonness, not in strife and jealousy. But put ye on the Lord
Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts
thereof. (11-14)

11. And this, knowing the season. He now begins another form of
exhortation. Since the rays of heavenly life have begun to shine upon
us at the dawn of day, we ought to do what those who are in the public
gaze are in the habit of doing. These take great care not to do any
base or dishonourable action, for if they have committed any offence,
they see that they will be answerable to too many witnesses. Much
more should we avoid all uncleanness, since we ourselves always stand
in the sight of God and His angels, and are invited by Christ, the true
Sun of righteousness, to behold His face.

In brief, therefore, the words mean this: ‘Since we know that the
proper time has now come in which to awake from sleep, let us cast
aside all that belongs to the night. Let us shake off all the works of
darkness, for the darkness itself has now been dispersed, and let us
attend to the works of light, and walk as we should in the day.’ The
intervening words are to be put in parenthesis. They are metaphorical,
however, and therefore it is worth while noting the meaning of each
part. By night Paul means ignorance of God, and all who are held in
this ignorance wander and sleep as in the night. Unbelievers labour
under the two evils of being blind and stupid. This stupidity Paul
designates a little later by sleep, which is the image, he says, of death.
By light he means the revelation of divine truth, by which Christ the
Sun of righteousness arises on us. By awaking out of sleep he means that
we are to be armed and ready to do what the Lord requires of us. The *works of darkness* are shameful and wicked acts, for the night, he says, is without shame. The *armour of light* means honourable, sober, and chaste actions, which are usually done in the day. Paul says, *armour* rather than works, because we are to fight in the service of the Lord. The words at the beginning, *And this*, are to be read by themselves. They are dependent upon Paul’s previous doctrine, and mean, like the Latin *adhæc* or *praeterea*, ‘besides’, or ‘furthermore’. The *time*, he says, is known to believers, because the calling of God and the day of visitation require new life and behaviour. He then adds in explanation that it was *high time* to awake. *Καιρὸς* rather than *χρόνος* denotes the right moment or opportunity.

*For now is salvation nearer to us.* This passage is variously misinterpreted. Many refer the word *believed* to the time of the law, as if Paul were saying that the Jews had believed before Christ appeared. I reject this view, however, as harsh and strained. It would surely be absurd to apply a general truth to a small part of the Church. There were very few Jews in the whole of the group to which he wrote. This language, therefore, would not be appropriate to the Romans. Also, his comparison between night and day in my opinion removes this difficulty. The statement, therefore, seems to me to be perfectly straightforward—‘our salvation is now nearer than when we began to believe’—and refers to the time which preceded their faith. Since the adverb has an indefinite sense, this statement of the apostle’s is much more appropriate, as we see from what follows.

12. *The night is far spent, and the day is at hand.* This is the occasion which he has just mentioned. Although believers were not yet received into the full light, he rightly compares our knowledge of a future life which shines upon us by the Gospel to the dawn of day. *Day* does not here mean, as elsewhere, the light of faith (otherwise he would not have said that it was only approaching, but that it was present, and indeed now shining in the middle of its course). It means rather that blessed splendour of the heavenly life, the beginnings of which we now see in the Gospel. What he is saying in brief is that as soon as God begins to call us, we ought to direct our attention to the coming of Christ, just as we conclude from the first rising of the day that the full light of the sun is at hand.

He says that the *night* is far spent, because we are not covered with thick darkness as the unbelievers, who see no spark of life. The hope of resurrection is set before our eyes by the Gospel. Indeed, the light of faith, by which we learn that the full brightness of heavenly glory is at hand, ought to arouse us and keep us from taking our ease while we are on earth. Shortly afterwards, however, when he bids us to
walk in the light as in the day, he does not continue the same metaphor, for he compares our present state, in which Christ shines on us, to the day. Paul wanted in various ways to exhort us at times to meditate on our future life, and at other times to regard God with reverence.

13. *Not in revelling and drunkenness.* He mentions here three kinds of vices, each of which he has referred to by two names—intemperance and excess, carnal lust and the impure conduct which is connected with it, and envy and contention. If these actions are so shameful that even carnal men are ashamed to commit them before the eyes of their fellow men, we, who walk in the light of God, ought at all times to refrain from them, even when we are withdrawn from men’s sight. Although he mentions strife before jealousy in the third group, Paul undoubtedly meant to instruct us that dispute and contests arise from this source, for when anyone seeks the pre-eminence, there is envy of one another. Ambition is the cause of both evils.

14. *But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ.* This metaphor occurs very frequently in Scripture in regard to what adorns or disfigures a man. Both are seen in his clothing. A filthy and torn garment disgraces a man, while a clean and attractive one secures him much esteem. To put on Christ means here to be defended on every side by the power of His Spirit, and thus rendered fit to discharge all the duties of holiness. In this way the image of God, which is the only true ornament of the soul, is renewed in us. Paul has in view the purpose of our calling, since God, by adopting us, in grafts us into the body of His only-begotten Son with this requirement, that we renounce our former life and become new men in Him. For this reason he also states in another passage that believers *put on Christ* in baptism (Gal. 3.27).

*And make not provision for the flesh.* As long as we carry our flesh with us, we cannot entirely neglect it, for although our conversation is in heaven, yet we are pilgrims on earth. We must therefore pay attention to the things that relate to the body, but only as affording us help in our pilgrimage, and not that they may make us forget our homeland. Even the heathen have said that nature is contented with a little, while the appetites of men are insatiable. Everyone, therefore, who desires to satisfy the longings of the flesh must not only be profligate, but also immersed in the very depths of lustfulness.

Paul curbs our desires and reminds us that the cause of all intemperance is discontent with the sober or lawful use of our possessions. He has therefore laid down this rule, that we are to provide for the wants of our flesh, but not to indulge its lusts. It is in this way that we shall use this world without abusing it.