

# LifeWay Explore the Bible Series for November 6: Can you be counted on?

October 26, 2011

Romans 13 continues an answer to an implied question in Romans 12: What is the appropriate response to God?

The foundation of that answer is in 12:1 where we are told to offer our bodies to God in worship. Such an offering is much more profound than a simple intellectual acknowledgment of God, God's power or even God's gracious act in Jesus. Knowing the stories of Jesus doesn't save us. James reminds us that even the demons know the stories of salvation, but they do them no good (James 2:19).

It is not intellectual knowledge or even a favorable interest in God that enables us to lay hold of the grace that moves us from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light. The essential ingredient is faith, and faith is an application of God's truth in our lives. In other words, we trust God enough to act on that trust. Our faith can then be observed by our neighbors (Matthew 5:13-16).

Because we are citizens not only of God's kingdom but also of an earthly nation, our civic behavior becomes an opportunity for our faith to shine. The Apostle Paul reminds the Roman Christians that just because their ultimate allegiance lies with Christ, that does not mean they can forsake their civic responsibilities.

For most of us, temptation often lies in the other direction—giving too much importance and value to a kingdom that is temporal and whose aims are necessarily self-serving.

The Roman Christians were not tempted by too much involvement with their existing government but by too little. They had made the life-changing and often risky confession: "Jesus is Lord." This was in direct opposition to the Roman confession: "Caesar is Lord."

Arising from their confession was the question: If we believe that Jesus, not Caesar, is Lord, then does that mean we can ignore Caesar and all his laws and commands?

Paul says, "no." The governing authorities, he says, "have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves" (13:1-2).

The authority of government is useful in ordering the diverse lives of people into a community. While earthly government does not achieve the ultimate or eternal good, it does achieve a necessary good, and Christ-followers should partner with the governing authorities by doing good also (13:3-4).

One way in which our faith in God can shine forth is in our faith-informed efforts to do good in partnership with and involvement in our civic government.

But civic government is neither the most important work nor the most binding authority upon us. We are, after all, citizens of an eternal kingdom whose authority stretches across national boundaries and beyond cultural and ethnic barriers. Our most powerful motivation toward good works should be the love of God we have received.

The society-sustaining commands like "'Do not commit adultery,' 'Do not murder,' 'Do not steal,' 'Do not covet' and whatever other commandments there may be are summed up in this one rule: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the

fulfillment of the law” (13:9-10).

As Jesus commanded us, we are to be a people known for our loving actions, and it is through our faith-fueled love that our identity as disciples of Christ will be evident (John 13:35). It is all too easy to lose sight of love when we are caught up in the potential of authoritative governmental power to coerce goodness in the lives of others. Yet if we allow our passion for earthly authority to overshadow our Christ-like love, we endanger our witness in the world.

As chapter 13 comes to a close, Paul once again forces our vision to the grand design of God. We are to understand this present age in light of what God is doing in Christ Jesus. We also are to understand the urgency of the moment, recognizing that now is the time for witness in the world. We are to keep the larger vision of God before us, recognizing that God’s plan involves more than just me; God’s authority is greater than government authority; and God’s love is more fulfilling than any law.

The key to this larger vision of God is Jesus. Our life, our purpose, our witness, our hope and our salvation are all about Jesus. We are meant to be clothed with Christ, and in him we have eternal life.

I once heard a preacher speak about Jesus’ resurrection of Lazarus (John 11). He commented that after Lazarus responded to Jesus’ call to life and walked out of the tomb, Jesus instructed that Lazarus “take off the grave clothes” (John 11:44). That image has stuck with me through the years.

In Christ, we have been called from darkness to light, from death to life. We must shed the grave clothes and clothe ourselves in Christ if we are going to walk in the light of his life for us. Now is the time for laying aside the useless, destructive ways of the world. Now is the time to live in hope. Now is the time to bear witness to the righteousness of God through holy love. Now is the time.