Questions for reflection:

Is the church itself often to blame for the bad treatment it must endure? Do we fully realize that God will judge the world and, therefore, there is no need to get even now? When does doing good to those who abuse us help them to repent? When does it merely encourage them to become more oppressive?

44. Romans 13:1–7

Let every soul be subject to the ruling authorities, for there is no authority except by God’s will, and those that exist have been appointed by God. Hence, whoever resists authority has also opposed what has been decreed by God, and those who do oppose will receive judgment on themselves. For those who rule are not a deterrent to right actions but to bad ones. Do you want not to be afraid of authority? Do what is right, and you will have its commendation. For a ruler is God’s servant for your good. But if you do evil, be afraid, because he has the power to punish. He is God’s servant, punishing in God’s behalf those who commit evil. Therefore, it is necessary to be subject, not only because of punishment, but also because of conscience. Accordingly, pay your taxes, for rulers are God’s servants who devote their time to this very matter. Give to all what is their due, tribute to those who demand tribute, customs to those who collect customs, deference to those who expect deference, honor to those who expect honor. (13:1–7)

Paul stresses that his readers must submit to the governing authorities. Paul is emphatic. Anyone who resists the civil authorities resists God’s will. Hence, Christians must obey public officials not merely to escape civil punishment but also for the sake of conscience.

Paul emphasizes the need to be submissive because previously many members of the Roman church had gotten into
trouble with the authorities, and the church as a whole had suffered. As we noted above, shortly after Christianity arrived in Rome, Christian Jews somehow came into conflict with their compatriots, and the violence had become so severe that the Emperor Claudius ordered Jews to be expelled. We have no idea how many Jewish Christians were expelled from Rome, but the fact that both Luke and the Pagan historian Suetonius mention the expulsion suggests that the number must have been considerable. At a later time, perhaps shortly after the death of Claudius in 54, at least some of those who had been expelled began to return to Rome. Luke tells us explicitly that Priscilla and Aquila were among those who had to leave the capital (Acts 18:2). Yet, by the time Paul was writing, Priscilla and Aquila were back in Rome since Paul sends his greetings to them (Rom. 16:3). Nevertheless, the legal status of these returnees must have been precarious. The authorities could only have regarded them as past troublemakers who bore constant watching. Of course, their presence in the church must have placed the Christian movement as a whole under suspicion. Hence, for the well being of the church it was essential that every Christian be a model citizen and not provoke the authorities again.

Paul's specific emphasis on the need to pay taxes was probably a response to a contemporary controversy in Roman society. According to the ancient historian Tacitus (Annals 13.50–51), during the reign of Nero (who succeeded Claudius) the populace demanded tax relief, and the emperor responded by initially advocating the total elimination of indirect taxation. Then under pressure from the Senate Nero changed his mind and only implemented modest reforms. Hence, the issue of taxation was very much in the air, and probably many were questioning whether they should have to pay taxes at all. Consequently, Paul emphasizes that being submissive to the authorities includes giving "tribute to those who demand tribute" and "customs to those who demand customs."

Nevertheless, in urging his readers to pay their taxes, Paul also echoes the teaching of Jesus. Jesus too insisted that we
must render to Caesar what is his due, and part of what he is due is taxes (Mark 12:13-17).

When he wrote that his readers should obey the governing authorities, Paul must have been aware that such advice would help make him popular. The church at Rome had already suffered the wrath of the government and was now under suspicion. Hence, Paul's intended readers must have been in fervent agreement that Christians should respect the authorities. Paul wrote Romans primarily to gain the support of the Roman church for his impending missions to Jerusalem and Spain. Hence, he was eager to make points that would gain approval and must have known that telling people to respect government officials would ingratiate him with the congregation as a whole. Of course, by insisting that his readers should be subject to the government, Paul is also implying that he will not himself get the church into trouble with the authorities when he comes to Rome. In the past Paul had repeatedly run afoul of the government. Indeed, in 2 Corinthians, which was written before Romans, Paul boasts about the fact that he had been beaten with rods on three different occasions (2 Cor. 11:25). Being beaten with rods was a Roman, not a Jewish penalty. In view of his past, Paul's assurance that he would not get the church into trouble with the authorities may have been necessary.

At first glance, Paul's argumentation seems to imply that Christians should always obey the government. Paul claims that all governmental authority comes from God and, hence, anyone who resists the government rebels against God's will.

In fact, however, Paul presupposes that the governmental authorities he is discussing are behaving justly, and he was certainly aware that not all officials act this way. Paul explicitly states that the rulers about whom he is writing are “not a deterrent to right actions but to bad ones” and that anyone who does what is right will receive their approval. Since Paul himself had repeatedly suffered beatings at the hands of various authorities (2 Cor. 11:24—25), he knew well that not all authorities reward virtue and punish vice. Moreover, Paul also assumes that the authorities he is discussing derive their authority from God. Of course, the
Bible as a whole assumes that what happens in history is in some sense God's will, and, therefore, in general God appoints kings. Nevertheless, the Bible is also aware that God passes judgment on evil rulers and raises up prophets to resist them.

At the time Paul was writing, the Roman government was at its best. Nero, who only a few years later would become a brutal emperor, was still under the influence of good advisers, including the philosopher Seneca. As a result, government reforms were underway. As we noted already, Nero was even attempting to reduce the burden of taxation.

Consequently, it would be a mistake to appeal to this passage to justify unquestioning obedience to evil regimes. Even though Paul at times sounds as if he is advocating uncritical obedience, his argumentation as a whole suggests that he is merely saying that the Roman Christians should obey their present government since it in fact does reward good behavior and punish bad.

Nevertheless, Paul's positive evaluation of government may be an especially helpful reminder to people in the United States today. At present, there is a prejudice against government and, especially, taxation. People often talk as if politicians and bureaucrats are necessarily wasteful and corrupt and every governmental program is necessarily ineffective. People also talk as if taxation is immoral and that the first thing that any Christian citizen should advocate is a large tax cut. Theologically such attitudes amount to claiming that God cannot work through government. Paul's monotheism insists otherwise. The God who made the universe and is present in history calls governmental systems to obey him, just as he calls individuals to do so. Naturally, the authorities may not always answer this call, but in principle they are always free to do so. Hence, God can be present in the acts of government, just as he can be present anywhere, and programs supported by taxes may indeed accomplish God's will.
Questions for reflection:

Do you agree that at present Americans tend to be unreflectively cynical about government? Where does such cynicism come from? Does it promote good or bad government? Is it compatible with the theological claim that God calls everyone to serve him and that rulers are free to answer this summons? Do you consider that paying taxes is a Christian duty? Why or why not?

45. Romans 13:8–10

You have no obligation to anyone, except to love each other, for those who love have fulfilled the goal for the rest of the law. For the commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; you shall not murder; you shall not steal; you shall not covet,” [Deut. 5:17–19, 21] and any other commandment are summed up in this saying, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” [Lev. 19:18]. Love does nothing bad to a neighbor. Consequently, love fulfills the entire law. (13:8–10)

After telling his readers that they must obey the ruling authorities, Paul stresses that ideally such obedience is an expression of love. Performing one’s civic duty—like performing any ethical act—is for the Christian an application of the commandment to love one’s neighbor.

Paul prepares to address the delicate question of how Jewish and Gentile Christians should live together. In just a few verses he will comment directly on the disagreement between the “weak” and the “strong.” As we shall see, the “weak” are conservative Jewish Christians, and the strong are Gentiles and their liberal Jewish allies.

Of course, the primary difference between these two groups was their attitude toward the Mosaic Law. The Mosaic Law was the basis of Jewish identity. Its regulations affected
every aspect of life from how the Jews should worship to how they should dress. The very purpose of the Law was to make Jews different from other groups, to make the Jews a “holy” people, that is a people who had been set apart for God. Naturally, Gentiles had never been expected to keep the Law. They had their own beliefs and customs. Moreover, in practice some of the law—especially, circumcision—was offensive to Greco-Roman culture.

Paul had spent his missionary career arguing that Christian Gentiles did not need to adopt the Mosaic Law and become Jews. Once Gentiles began to convert to Christianity, the early church struggled with the issue of whether one could be a follower of Jesus without being or becoming Jewish. Conservatives insisted that Christians had to be Jewish and, therefore, that Gentiles who wanted to be members of the church had to adopt the Mosaic Law. Paul argued the opposite. Gentiles could be full members of the church and still retain their own cultural heritage. Of course, Paul’s insistence that Gentiles could become Christians without becoming Jews was the foundation of his whole missionary work.

Paul’s position raised the difficult issue of how Jewish and Gentile Christians could interact. If Jewish and Gentile Christians each retained their own cultural behavior, how could they associate? For example, according to the Mosaic Law, Jews could only eat certain things. How then could Jews and Gentiles in the church eat together?

As Paul prepares to address how Jews and Gentiles can live together within the church, he tells his readers that the only real obligation that the Law imposes on us now is to love each other. Apparently, Paul is claiming that God’s purpose in giving the Law was to prepare for the coming of Jesus and the new possibilities of loving others that Jesus would give us. Paul does not say that love keeps the entire Law. Indeed, Paul could not say such a thing because he did not believe that Jewish food laws or circumcision necessarily express love. Instead, love “fulfills” the Law. In other words, the purpose of the Mosaic
Law was to prepare for the coming of Jesus who would teach us to love in a new and deeper way.

Of course, both Jews and Gentiles could affirm the importance of loving others, especially since Jesus had insisted that loving one’s neighbor was one of the two great commandments (e.g., Mark 12:31). Jewish Christians would appreciate that the commandment to love one’s neighbor as oneself was part of the Mosaic Law (Lev. 19:18), and other Jewish teachers considered it an apt summary of the entire law (cf. Mark 12:32–33, Luke 10:25–28). Gentile Christians would recognize that this commandment did not require them to adopt any specific Jewish customs. Both groups, of course, were loyal to Jesus and would recognize that here Paul was appealing to Jesus’ own insistence that love was the central demand for his disciples.

By stressing that love was the only obligation that Christians have, Paul ultimately gave to the church the ability to distinguish between what we call ethics and what we call ethnic custom. Of course, the Mosaic Law itself makes no such distinction. In the Bible the Mosaic Law is a unity. All of it comes directly from God, and in such books as Leviticus, “ethical” and “cultural” norms appear side by side. Consequently, what we would call custom or taboo was as binding as what we call ethics. Not eating pork was just as binding as not committing theft. Paul, by contrast, makes love the decisive principle that determines what is lawful, or, to use our terminology, what is ethical. Hence, anything that does not involve love is mere ethnic custom and can be disregarded when occasion demands.

**Questions for reflection:**

Do we still sometimes have difficulty distinguishing ethics from ethnic custom? Do you agree with Paul that the test of whether something is “ethical” depends solely on whether it is an expression of love? On that basis would you consider such things as polygamy or homosexual activity to be ethical or not?
46. Romans 13:11–14

In addition to this, be aware of what time it is, because it is already the hour for you to rise from sleep, for our deliverance is nearer now than when we became Christians. The night is far along; it is nearly daytime. Let us be done with dark deeds, and take up the weapons of light. Let us behave decently as is proper for daytime, not in excessive partying and drunkenness, not in orgies and promiscuity, not in fighting and jealousy. But clothe yourself with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not indulge sinful desires. (13:11–14)

To prepare his readers for his specific advice about their disputes, he reminds them that salvation is near. Paul believed that the return of Jesus would be relatively soon. Jesus was presently in heaven completing a few final preparations and awaiting a few final developments on earth. Soon, however, the promised time would come. Jesus would return in triumph to the world and pass judgment on this present evil age and inaugurate a new era. As we have seen, this era would include the resurrection of the dead, the transformation of nature, and the elimination of evil. Of course, the belief that final judgment and salvation are at hand provides a powerful incentive to repent without delay so we will be ready. Consequently, Paul reminds his readers that salvation is growing progressively nearer and that they should act accordingly.

As time passed and Jesus did not return, the Church increasingly emphasized that we will experience salvation and judgment at the moment of death. Paul himself appears to have believed that the individual does reach some sort of salvation or judgment at death. In his letter to the Philippians Paul tells his readers that they are not to grieve over the possibility that he may be executed because it would be far better for him personally to depart and be with Jesus (Phil. 1:23). Nevertheless,
since Paul expected that final salvation for the entire world was imminent, he placed little emphasis on the individual departing to be with God at death. As more and more time passed and Jesus did not return, the Church increasingly emphasized that Christians must prepare for judgment at death when we go to heaven or hell.

Of course, in very recent times, out-of-body experiences from people who are clinically dead seem to confirm that we do indeed go to God at death and experience his judgment and salvation.

If individual judgment and salvation do occur when we die, Paul was right to emphasize that salvation is at hand and that such salvation grows progressively nearer. Anyone can die unexpectedly, and everyone will die within a century or so.

Nevertheless, it seems to me that we must continue to emphasize Paul’s hope that God will transform the world. If we limit salvation to what each individual inherits at death, we invite people to ignore the problems and possibilities of this life. Instead, we encourage people to think of this life only as something we must somehow get through so we can go on to what is truly important. By contrast, if we think that God will transform the world itself, we will have a greater incentive for working to renew the earth; since by doing so we will help accomplish God’s plan.

We must also emphasize that the dead share this hope. In Paul’s theology the dead have not yet reached final fulfillment. To be sure, they are with Jesus and rejoice. Nevertheless, they too are waiting for the final transformation of the world when they will share perfect fellowship with those who are still alive. Today we may wonder whether Paul was right to believe that the dead would return to earth along with Jesus. We must, however, continue to affirm that the dead still care about our world and long for the day when the earth finally reaches spiritual maturity.

To symbolize the evils that his readers are to avoid, Paul seems to draw on the ancient tavern. There, as in modern bars,
one might easily encounter “excessive partying and drunkenness,” “orgies and promiscuity,” “fighting and jealousy.”

Such images may have made Paul’s intended readers a little smug but are a reminder to us that sin is primarily communal. It is unlikely that many Christians at Rome were “party animals.” Instead, they probably viewed the ancient tavern as the symbol for all that was wrong with the conventional world. Perhaps some of Paul intended readers had themselves once frequented the taverns and then renounced that lifestyle when they became Christians (cf. 1 Cor. 6:9-11). Accordingly, Paul’s images of the saloon may have confirmed Paul’s readers in their sense that now they were indeed children of the light. Nevertheless, to us Paul’s images are a salutary reminder that the sins of individuals are usually rooted in the sins of societies. American culture tends to assume that individuals sin primarily because of their own personal failings, not because of the defects of the groups to which they belong. Paul knew better. In the climax of chapter 1 he stressed that Pagans encourage one another to sin. Similarly, it is the communal interaction at a saloon that is primarily responsible for the sins of the individuals there. Consequently, to escape sin we must join some community in which the members encourage each other to behave righteously. Of course, for Paul that community was the church.

It is striking that Paul writes once again that we can improve our behavior only by first allowing Christ to transform us. At the end of his exhortations to abstain from drunkenness, sexual excess, and other vices, Paul stresses that we must clothe ourselves with Jesus. In other words, we must allow the Spirit of Jesus to change us. The image of clothing ourselves with Jesus would probably have reminded Paul’s readers of their baptisms when they took off their old clothes. Of course, baptism is also the sacramental moment in which Christians receive the Spirit.
Questions for reflection:

How would we and our communities act differently if we thought that the old world was about to end and a new one about to begin? Do we as a culture think that we can change the world, or are we increasingly fatalistic and assume that things must remain as they are? What are the consequences of such attitudes? How does people’s spiritual vision change as they approach death? What difference does it make if we believe that the dead still care about our world?

47. Romans 14:1–12

Welcome those who are weak in faith, but do not get involved in arguments about opinions. One person’s faith lets them eat everything, but the weak person eats only vegetables. Let not those who eat despise those who do not, and let not those who do not eat judge those who do, for God has welcomed them. Who are you to judge someone else’s servants? Whether they succeed or fail is for their own master to decide, and they will succeed, for the Lord is able to make them do so. Some people judge that one day is more important than another. Others judge that every day is alike. Let everyone be fully convinced in their own mind. Those who are concerned about special days show concern for the Lord, and those who eat show concern for the Lord, for they give thanks to God. And those who do not eat do so from concern for the Lord. They also give thanks to God. None of us lives just for ourselves, and no one dies just for ourselves. For when we are alive, we live for the Lord, and when we die, we die for the Lord. So whether we live or whether we die, we belong to the Lord. Because this is the reason Christ died and came back to life, that he might be Lord both of the dead and the living. But you, why do you judge your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we all will stand before God’s tribunal. It is written, ‘I swear by my life, the Lord says, every knee will bow to me and every tongue will