

Episode 9: The American Mask Crisis, and How Romans 13:1 Does Not Prohibit Civil Disobedience, Part A

Welcome to Rethinking the Bible with Jack Pelham. This is an audio podcast, where we apply Reality-Based Thinking to interpreting the Bible. Reality-Based Thinking is my name for a philosophy that seeks to make constant use of honesty, rationality, and responsibility in seeking out the reality of things. And I define reality as the state of things as they actually exist, as opposed to one's perceptions, beliefs, or wishes about them.

As humans, and also as Christians, we make many thinking errors. That is, we make many errors regarding what we think, what we decide, what we believe, how much we believe it, and how we consider evidence. And this is certainly true when it comes to how we interpret some Bible passages. If you don't think this is true, then how do you explain all the divisions between Christians regarding what they believe about various things? If so many of us are at odds with one another, then how can this not be a sign that at least some of us have got something or other wrong?

We've already looked at a few things in this podcast series that the Bible has to say about thinking errors, and we've talked about how the cognitive scientists today are concerned with understanding the same sorts of errors. But I think it's important for us to avoid the temptation to think that the disagreements that come about from such thinking errors among the Christians are nothing more than harmless differences of opinion. No, there can be some serious repercussions from what goes on in our minds. And sometimes, it can cause deep, deep, trouble.

For example, consider how the religious leaders in the Spanish Inquisition thought mistakenly that God condoned their torture and execution of many thousands of people over a 200-year period, ending in the early 1800s. This could not have happened had they not made thinking errors in what they decided and believed, for God condones no such thing.

Or consider how many people with lighter skin colors have been taken in by the totally-debunked doctrine that God cursed all dark-sinned peoples back in the book of Genesis. This terrible thinking was used to justify slavery, as well as all manner of cruelty and injustice—even to the point of justifying commonplace bigotry.

Did all believers in Jesus buy into such things? Of course not. And of course, this all raises the question, “What is a TRUE believer in Jesus?” And even that question has been handled with a great amount of cognitive error over the centuries, with a great many groups, who are themselves in doctrinal error over this or that, shunning other groups for THEIR supposed errors. Bad thinking and good Christianity simply don’t go together. And this is because Christianity is a reality-based religion—based on things as they actually exist, and not merely as we might perceive them to be, or believe them to be, or wish them to be.

And it’s important that we understand that not all thinking errors come about because we are terrible, wicked, and depraved people. No, some of it comes about simply because we haven’t learned better---because we haven’t learned to be honest, rational, and responsible in all our thinking, believing, and deciding. And because we haven’t learned how to regulate the DEGREE to which we believe things that we just don’t have enough information about to be 100% certain. If you’re honest, you’ll know what I’m talking about—it’s when we decide to believe a thing lock, stock, and barrel, even though we know—or should know---that it’s not fully settled, and that there are still some questions to be answered about it—and that we haven’t yet vetted all the other possibilities than the one we’re wanting at the moment to believe. And there’s one more common reason that we make thinking mistakes—and that’s that we simply aren’t paying adequate attention to a matter---or that we’re not paying enough attention to what we’re doing with these minds that God gave us---that is, that we’re negligent when it comes to Quality Control over our own minds.

In light of these things, I adopted the term *Reality-Based Thinking* to apply to the best practices of thinking that go all the way back to the origin of our species. And Reality-Based Thinking focuses very much on honesty, rationality, and responsibility. But Christianity, for many, may give lip service to these three virtues from time to time without fully grasping their importance in the kind of thinking that God wants believers to do. Regardless of the platitudes a local Christian congregation may use frequently, it is far too easy to let matters of cognitive diligence slip—to let errors of interpretation or belief or of vetting become so deeply established in the church culture that they are no longer things to be thought about or reexamined, but simply things to be believed—and often, with as little thinking going on as possible. And this kind of negligence can

translate into some serious real-world consequences. Bad ideas need to be nipped in the bud, rather than watered and cultivated and fertilized.

Well, I'm afraid that today's topic is an excellent example of some bad thinking that has gone unaddressed for far too long among many of the churches. And I want you to know that I wasn't planning to address anything like this for a long time, because it's a very complicated and volatile subject—and I've been trying to get this audience ready for doing this kind of thinking by focusing on one fundamental subject at a time until we've all developed some good habits in common, from which we will be better prepared to tackle the tougher issues.

Having said all that, however, I think that the United States are in such a crisis that it's time to address this difficult and controversial subject right away, even if not all the audience are well-practiced at examining subjects honestly, rationally, and responsibly.

At the time of this recording, many of the States in our Union are under various lockdown orders from the governors, or perhaps from mayors, city councils, or local "health officers"—the latter being an office many of us had never heard of before March of 2020. And now, more recently, many areas are under orders to wear facemasks while in public.

During the initial toilet-paper-buying panic that was fanned into flame, many were quite resistant to talk about the unconstitutionality of such orders—and about the economy-wrecking consequences of them. Many felt that anyone who would mention such objections were suffering from a heartless lack of concern for the public health emergency that it was—and for all those who were sure to suffer so greatly from COVID-19. They would say things like, "I can't believe you think the economy is more important than Grandma." But many of those people are now recognizing that not everything was as it seemed at first, and that there has been considerable manipulation and disinformation going on. And of them, many now suspect that the motives behind it have very little to do with public health, and more to do with dirty politics. And they believe they see even more encroachments coming, such as mandatory vaccination and microchipping, for example.

Even so, to many among them are scared to push back against the government. They're scared to say "no" to the masks and the social distancing and the

lockdown orders. And they think they have good reason to be scared, for they think that the Bible tells them so.

But does it?

Those who are concerned about this are more likely to bring up Romans 13 than any other passage. So, our question today is: Does Romans 13 teach that if Americans don't obey their government officials about wearing masks—or anything else—that this is a sin against God?

That's what we're going to talk about today. But because this is rushing the overall plan for this podcast, let me put you on alert here. Be advised that I'm going to be exceedingly thorough and meticulous in this episode. If you're not the scholar type, or the student type---if you're the sort to just want the bullet points—you're probably not going to enjoy this episode as much as some others. And this will be particularly true if you're the sort to just want to believe whatever you want to believe, with no concern as to whether fact, logic, and sourcing back up your pre-determined conclusions or not.

In one sense, you could say that today's episode is largely about the hermeneutical question of biblical one-liners and how we should address them. Indeed, you've seen me make regular use of one-liners in this series—as we've addressed several thematic statements found in scripture. But notice what we do with those; we show them for what they are, and then we explore how those themes are woven throughout the scriptures.

Well, today, I'm going to show you how the modern idea that Romans 13:1 means it's a sin to disobey your government is a terrible misinterpretation of what Paul wrote---and how it not only gets us into some serious doctrinal trouble, but political and societal trouble, as well. Indeed, this super-popular interpretation of Romans 13:1 is—to use a funny phrase from parenting—the reason we can't have anything nice. Christians have gotten bamboozled on this topic, and have drawn a conclusion that can't stand up to scrutiny—yet they stubbornly hold on to it—and this makes them relatively useless when it comes to being good citizen overseers of their own governments, federal, state, or local. They've become a spectator class—assuming that the Bible was written to them, even though it was actually written to different peoples in different times, places, and circumstances. They assume that the apostle Paul would have written the same thing to them

today that he wrote in Romans 13:1---and they're also assuming that their understanding of what he wrote to the Romans is accurate. And it's not—because they're missing a HUGE piece of the puzzle.

So, to handle this topic with the care it deserves, it's going to take three episodes---this one and two more after it. So you're going to need to be very patient with this topic, because frankly, I am utterly convinced that 90% or more of American Christians are not ready to handle this topic. Yet such a state of emergency exists right now in the United States that if this common misunderstanding doesn't get settled, there's little hope for turning around this current campaign by the Communists to take over the country.

The more mentally disciplined and mature an audience is, the quicker you can move through a topic without leading where the audience cannot follow. But because we're jumping into the deeper end of the pool to address this, we're going to have to be very careful not to lose anybody along the way. So you're going to need to be patient today, as this is a monster of a topic. So before we get into the actual question itself, I need you to hear me out—because you need to prepare your minds to be corrected. And in our culture, it is close to taboo to correct anybody—even though in the First Century Christian culture, it was considered a kindness to correct somebody, and they were expected to take the correction to heart and to change their thinking accordingly.

So let's take a moment to review the podcast up until now and put this current topic into perspective. So far in this podcast series, I have been very methodical in how I have started it, and what I've discussed. I have seen a grievous evil under the sun, to quote Solomon, inasmuch as I have seen so very many American Christians making judgements about the Bible, or from the Bible, that they're just not qualified to make. I've seen them drawing faulty conclusions, and yet feeling that the conclusion simply must be the very conclusion that God himself draws in some certain matter. I've seen them in debates wherein BOTH sides are wrong---or wherein both sides might be right about **some** things, but go about proving their cases in dubious ways---in ways that cheat against logic or fact---in ways that don't take all the relevant material into account, and so forth.

I am utterly convinced—and this is the argument that I began to make from the very first episode—that God cares about how we think, and that true Christians

are not free to think just any old way they want to think about a matter, but that God expects them to think honestly, rationally, and responsibly about it. And so far, I've shown you lots of scripture about this---and there's much more to be discussed in this ongoing theme of ours.

Also, I'm convinced that errors in our thinking regarding Bible interpretation can have some very serious and even dire consequences sometimes. Many great evils have been pretendedly "justified" by misinterpreted Bible passages. And if not justified, they have been tolerated, at least---left to fester, to the detriment of our society. And so here's a question to get your brain working before we get any further into this:

When you get to heaven and you get to talk with God, are you going to discover that you were 100% correct in your every belief and understanding?

Go ahead and raise your hands if you think you'll discover that you've been right about everything. Or is it possible---and I know this may sound crazy---is it possible, hypothetically speaking, that maybe you have got a thing or two wrong along the way?

I'll just let that question sink in for a while as I continue.

I've been studying—and just as importantly—really THINKING about cognitive science for the past few years. And I've noticed that a lot of the kinds of mental errors that cognitive scientists talk about are also addressed somewhat in the Bible. Not in scientific jargon, of course. But it's in there. Jesus tells the Pharisees, for example, "Stop judging by mere appearances and make a right judgment." Well, this is exactly the sort of thing that cognitive scientists frequently talk about. But they might use words like "framing effect" or "assumptions" or "focal bias", and so forth. But they're talking about the same kind of errors. And why? Because these are **common** human errors, and they always have been. We all make them from time to time—and seem to be fairly prone to them. But we can learn to avoid them with practice. And we **should**. Obviously, Jesus expected the Pharisees, whom he rebuked about this particular cognitive error, to be **able** to cut it out if they wanted. And while you'll find some cognitive scientists who are on the glum side of the question of whether we can get any better in our thinking or not, you'll certainly find some others who are enthusiastic about the prospects of **trying** to do better. And keep this in mind.

Suppose that you could learn some about cognitive errors after studying and pondering for a while—and suppose that you could manage to avoid, say, 10% of your cognitive errors in a year. So you started at a rate of 100%, and you improved by 10%. That puts you at 90% of your previous level of errors---you know, before you started being concerned about it. And suppose that you keep learning and keep being diligent about it in year two—and that in that year, you're able to reduce your errors by another 10%. This brings you down to 81% of your original level of errors. And what would happen if, out of respect for God and Jesus and the prophets and apostles who taught that we should be honest, rational, and responsible thinkers—you kept on learning and being diligent for 10 years, reducing your thinking errors more and more every year. Where would you be after 10 years, where you started with 100%, and avoided 10% of each year's errors after that? You'd be at 39% of your original level of errors.

39%! And you need to think about that, because that's a HUGE difference. Suppose you were 100 pounds overweight, and got it down to just 39 pounds overweight. Is that a good improvement? You bet it is. Suppose you got angry and yelled at your kids 100 times in a year, but started working on it and got it down to 39 times a year? Is that a good improvement?

In Christianity, this is called maturation. It's called learning. It's called being transformed by the renewing of your mind. And it's all part of the NORMAL business of being a follower of Jesus. We're SUPPOSED to keep learning and growing and maturing and becoming more like Jesus. And don't get stuck on that 10% figure, because I just threw that out there as an example to put it into perspective.

Just like the scientists are divided on how much improvement we can expect to make in our thinking errors, Christians are divided, too, as to how much maturation to expect from Christians. And I think that MOST Christians estimate this number far too low. But I don't have time to make the case for that, nor to make the case against the Debbie Downer camp in cognitive science. Suffice it to say for now that I've seen a considerable improvement in my OWN mental maturation---so I'm looking at first-hand anecdotal evidence at least. And that ought to count for something. And there's more to my opinion than just that, mind you, but I don't have the time in this episode to make the larger case.

So, while I'm no cognitive scientist by trade, I'm totally on the side of those who say it's worth trying---just as I'm on the side of God and Jesus and the prophets and apostles who wrote about repentance and learning and knowledge and correction and wisdom and so forth. I totally believe we can learn to avoid errors--and further, that we can learn to get up once we have fallen down. Indeed, that's another favorite one-liner of mine from the Bible. I'm referring to the middle of the verse in

Jeremiah 8:4'This is what the LORD says: "'When people fall down, do they not get up?....

This is another one of those passages that reveals something to us about God's personality. It shows how he reasons through things. He's fussing at the Jews and prophesying about a time when their unrighteousness will finally be judged. And he seems to be marveling at how they refuse to repent. That is, and he's speaking metaphorically to them, they have "fallen down", yet they do not do the natural thing that humans do when they fall down. That is, they don't get it. Rather, they just stay down.

So let me read you a few verses from this context. And you'll see that this is quite a stinging and serious rebuke.

Jeremiah 8:4 "You shall say to them, Thus says the LORD:

When men fall, do they not rise again?

If one turns away, does he not return?

⁵Why then has this people turned away
in perpetual backsliding?

They hold fast to deceit;
they refuse to return.

⁶I have paid attention and listened,
but they have not spoken rightly;

no man relents of his evil,
saying, 'What have I done?'

Everyone turns to his own course,
like a horse plunging headlong into battle.

⁷Even the stork in the heavens
knows her times,

and the turtledove, swallow, and crane^[a]
keep the time of their coming,
but my people know not
the rules^[b] of the LORD.

⁸ “How can you say, ‘We are wise,
and the law of the LORD is with us’?
But behold, the lying pen of the scribes
has made it into a lie.

Do you see how he marvels at just how dull and stupid his people were being to keep on not paying attention to the particulars of his message to them? Even the scribes—those were the ones who made copies of the scriptures, and often who explained the scriptures to others—even the scribes were lying about what God’s words meant.

And I’m going to tell you that a scribe can cause lots of trouble to this very day. The Bible scholar---if he or she gets it wrong---the translator---if he or she gets it wrong—the preacher, the elder, the deacon, the Sunday School teacher, the parent, or the buddy who brings his Bible to work so he can tell you at lunch all about what it means----all of these people, including the Bible reader him- or herself can get things wrong, and can cause lots and lots of trouble.

And that’s what I think has gone wrong with Romans 13:1.

People have taken an oversimplified view of the passage and refuse to give it the thought it deserves. Their position makes no sense, but they don’t catch that because they won’t think about it. They are decidedly simple about it (and simple in the Bible is generally not a good thing!) Consider Proverbs 1:22, where God and Jesus are once again scratching their heads, as it were, over the stubborn simple-mindedness of some people:

Proverbs 1:22 "How long will you who are simple love your simple ways?
How long will mockers delight in mockery and fools hate knowledge?

Some people just love being simple-minded—and missing the particulars of a passage, and the implications thereof. They would never TELL you that they “hate knowledge”, but they do—and you can tell this by watching how they respond

when new information is put in front of them. Are they careful to deal with the details? No. They rush headlong with their oversimplified, overgeneralized conclusions.

And this sort of problem was still going on when you get to the First Century—to the time of the apostles. I want to read you

Hebrews 12:1 Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it.

I hope you were listening carefully to that. Here, I'll read it again:

Hebrews 12:1 Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it.

Now let's think about this. The author of Hebrews, whoever that was, was writing to his or her own contemporaries, in a letter whose title summons up the entire history of the Hebrew people from Abraham forward. And that's significant because these were God's chosen people for a long time—chosen out from the other nations—and we're going to get into that later in this same episode. So the author was giving this warning to his Hebrew audience in his own day, and telling them that they had better pay closer attention to the record of scripture that had been recited again and again in their culture. He said if they did not pay more careful attention, they would drift away from it.

Well, I'm adamant that when it comes to so much of the Bible, Christians today simply don't pay enough attention to it. They hear a passage and draw a conclusion about it---which is often the very conclusion they've been told by the preacher or teacher to draw---and then that's it. That settles the matter. It's over and done with. All wrapped up in a neat little package, never to be reconsidered. Never to be examined further. Never to be vetted. Most don't even listen to dissenting interpretations---nor want to. Most never look into the original language. Most never see whether anybody has been able to disprove the conclusion they have drawn in the matter. Rather, they seem to have a set-it-and-forget-it view of how beliefs work. That is, they adopt a belief, and consider it settled forever.

For a time some years back, I was acquainted with a very dear man of many virtues, who is a somewhat prolific Christian author. I asked him something like,

“With all these books you’ve written—how much of it do you still believe is accurate, and how much of it have you learned better since?” His response to me becomes more horrific every year. He told me that he still believes everything he had previously written.

I marvel at that, as my own experience has been quite the contrary. I am quite embarrassed at some of my earlier conclusions (even though *some* of them were sound, I’m sure). And my own big epiphany in 2012, after commencing a multi-year study of human error, was that “I am most likely wrong about many things.” So how is it—how could it be—that any of us has been right about our every conclusion for year after year, and that in not one matter of interpretation or understanding---that in not one case—were we wrong and in need of correction? That’s what scares me about my author-friend’s answer.

Indeed, James has something to say about this in

James 3:2 We all stumble in many ways. Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check.

It would be fascinating to spend some time pondering the exact intent of James in this passage. Did he mean to suggest that it would be impossible for someone to be never at fault in what he says? Or was he merely pointing out the rarity of it?

Well, either way, I can attest that I have not yet attained to such perfection. No, I frequently discover errors in my own thinking and writing—or in my inclinations in how to handle a matter. And I catch as many of them as I can, but they still get by me sometimes. So I don’t know how a mature author, who has been writing for years could think that he has been right all along on all topics. That’s a bit scary.

But I’m not talking about this to talk about authors; I’m talking about it to talk about the standard Christian. I don’t think that my friend is the only one who struggles with this gross overestimation of his own understanding of things. I think this is a very common problem with a great many Christians who simply have no interest in examining anything—so long as it requires any exertion. On this frustration, let me quote Mark Twain for you:

“In religion and politics people’s beliefs and convictions are in almost every case gotten at second-hand, and without examination, from authorities who have not themselves examined the questions at issue but have taken them at second-hand from other non-examiners, whose opinions about them were not worth a brass farthing.”

Mark Twain. *Autobiography*. 1907

Cognitive scientists would describe this human trait by calling us “cognitive misers”. That is, we avoid doing any thinking that we don’t have to do, just like a miser avoid doing any spending he doesn’t have to do. So many would simply rather have something to believe than to have something to examine. They’d rather have something to believe than something to prove. Then enters the politician or the preacher—both of whom are quite willing to tell them what to believe—and you’ve got a life-long belief to be entrenched, and it may not ever be examined again from the day it was first believed until the death of the one who believes it.

And then there is that most pernicious camp of Christian philosophy from those who are taught that to **defend** such unexamined beliefs is what is called “faith”. That is, they give themselves faith points for digging in their heels and doubling down and believing the things they believe—and resisting the urging of anyone else to look further into the matter. If you try to reason with them, they will take it as an attack from the devil himself, and will even go so far as to shun reason and logic as “worldly” or “unspiritual” or even “of the devil”. Thomas Paine had rather a stinging remark about this type of behavior when he wrote---and I’ve shortened this a little bit to make it more wieldy:

“To argue with a man who has renounced the use and authority of reason, ... is like administering medicine to the dead....” Thomas Paine. *The American Crisis*. 1775.

Once a believer rules out logic and reason—once he rules out the counsel of the REST of the Bible—once he rules out testing an idea with Socratic questions that show whether or not it can stand up to scrutiny—he might as well be dead, for he is just as inconvincible as he would be if you were talking to him as he lay in the casket at his own funeral. Yet many live this way, showing that they have not yet

let Jesus train them to think honestly, rationally, and responsibly, as Jesus himself did and does think.

And it's not just about politics and religion. It's also about many other areas, including things like science. And I want to share this observation from Max Plank about just how dull and irresponsible some people are when it comes to their scientific beliefs. It's rather a cynical generalization, but I think you can recognize the truth in it:

“A new scientific truth does not triumph by convincing its opponents and making them see the light, but rather because its opponents eventually die, and a new generation grows up that is familiar with it.”

Max Plank. Scientific Autobiography and Other Papers. Date unknown.

Why is it so hard to get us to examine a matter? Why is it so hard to correct us when we are wrong? Why do we tend to hold our beliefs until we die—even when we know, or **should** know, or should be able to easily recognize when they are wrong?

It's because of what the cognitive scientist would call “cognitive biases”---those stubborn mini-programs of thinking that often lead us to wrong conclusions---or that protect our wrong conclusions. And on the topic of biases, listen to this grand observation from Leo Tolstoy :

“The most difficult subjects can be explained to the most slow-witted man **if he has not formed any idea of them already**; but the simplest thing cannot be made clear to the most intelligent man **if he is firmly persuaded that he knows already**, without a shadow of doubt, what is laid before him.” Leo Tolstoy. The Kingdom of God is Within You. 1894.

Well, I'll tell you where you can find the “perfect storm” in this kind of belief. You can find it when the cognitive miser goes to church and finds a preacher to tell him erroneously just what some passage is supposed to mean. Once he gets his mind set on it—unless he's a person of very high character---in which case he wouldn't be a cognitive miser, now, would he?---he's going to stick with that belief for his whole life, and if you press him to reconsider it, he's just going to dig in deeper.

And there's a word for that. Two words, actually. The first word for it is "stupid". And the second, sadly, is "normal". Sadly, this is very normal behavior. It's typical for Americans, sadly—and it's probably typical everywhere else in the world, but I don't know anything about other cultures, so I'll just stick with what I know. It's very typical for Americans, and in American churches.

And this is so despite what the scriptures have to say about this sort of immature and twisted thinking habits. Listen to some proverbs about this sort of thing:

Proverbs 18:13 To answer before listening-- that is folly and shame.

Proverbs 12:1 Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge, but whoever hates correction is stupid.

So the question today is whether the listeners to this episode will answer before listening, and whether they will hate correction. I fear that I am wasting my time, as I have learned again and again that our society is simply disinterested in listening and in changing their minds to comport with the preponderance of the evidence.

So in this discussion, I'm going to assume that you hold to the traditional view of Romans 13:1, and my goal is to make you so utterly uncomfortable that you are forced to take a new look at it—even if you are a cognitive/moral miser who is unaccustomed to "spending" much on your thinking in general, or in giving careful thought to your own ways. If you do NOT hold the traditional view of Romans 13, I trust you'll understand that I'm not necessarily talking to you, rather than to get upset as if I were.

So there's your mega-introduction to the topic. This is now the fourteenth page of my script for this episode, and so far, it's all been designed just to try to get everybody ready to deal with the topic honestly, rationally, and responsibly. So let's jump in! In just a minute, I'm going to read you Romans 13:1 from a popular Bible version that really helps to promote a wrong idea about what Paul was writing about. But first, let me throw out a few one-liners about government from popular culture, and then I'll explain afterwards why I've done it. This first one's a funny one from Ronald Reagan:

"The nine most terrifying words in the English language are: I'm from the Government, and I'm here to help."

And here's a funny one attributed to Mark Twain:

"We have the best government that money can buy!"

And finally, from Will Rogers:

"Be thankful we're not getting all the government we're paying for!"

OK, so there are three funny American quotes about the government. And now I'm going to finally read the passage in question. I'm going to read Romans 13:1 from The Living Bible

Romans 13:1 Obey the government, for God is the one who put it there. All governments have been placed in power by God.

When you hear this verse, tell me what comes immediately to mind? When you hear those words, "the government", what do you think of? Don't you think of the same kinds of things you think of when you heard those three funny quotes about government just beforehand? Don't you think of presidents or congresses, or city councils, maybe? Don't you think of bureaucracies and red tape, or corruption, or inefficiency or ineptness---or all of the above? Don't you think of presidents and governors and mayors and building inspectors?

Of course, you do. That's how we use phrases like "the government" in our American English.

But this excerpt is from The Living Bible, which is not a translation from the original languages. Rather, it's a mere paraphrase. That is, it comes from people reading the Bible and saying, "Hmmm, OK, how can we put this verse in terms that are easier to understand to everyday Americans?"

And what's the problem with that? Well, where is it written that everything in the Bible is SUPPOSED to be easy to understand for everyday Americans?

The Bible is a collection of documents written in three now-dead languages, Hebrew, Aramaic, and Koine Greek---with lots of words having been borrowed into it from other now-dead languages---with 66 titled documents, some of which are themselves compromised of more than one unique document---and it has

over 31,000 verses, covering 1,100-or-so pages in the typical book. It was written across a span of somewhere around 1,500 years, though certain sections of it may be considerably older than that. And it was written by many separate authors, all from the Ancient Near Eastern culture, which lived thousands of miles away from us, on the other side of the oceans, and the latest document of which is about 2,000 years old.

Do you really THINK that this is supposed to be easy for the everyday American to understand? Where is that written? Indeed, the everyday American still struggles to get his OWN language right. Subject/verb agreement issues are common among Americans. So are spelling issues with homonyms—words that have the same sound, but different spellings, such as their, they're, and there. And Americans aren't very good with other types of mindware such as logic. For example, many confuse the logical statement, *If A, then B*, as being equivalent to the converse, *If B, then A*. And we're pretty lousy with probability—which simply requires a more advanced understanding of math and logic than most of us ever master. Indeed, we're not very good with math, either---and as a society, are we not conditioned to roll our eyes anytime the subject of math comes up? But those who are better with math can see math errors by the thousands in all the popular discussion about COVID-19 numbers. As a culture, we're pretty lousy in all the main mindwares: language, math, statistics, probability, logic, and law.

Why, then, is there such a nearly-ubiquitous idea that understanding the Bible---this set of ancient documents from another place and culture---should be fairly simple for us American believers? So many believers think that the Bible is a Magic 8 Ball of sorts---something you shake and turn upside down whenever you need some hope or encouragement---a book you flip open in search of one-liners that sound good to you when you're looking for a quick answer to some dilemma or discouragement. But this was not the intended use of the scriptures that make up the Bible. They were not written for the cognitive miser, but for the one who WANTS to understand.

But The Living Bible---well, that WAS written for the cognitive/moral miser. It's quite happy to just tell you what to think—not so that you can get it right, but so that it can be easy for you. It's like the easy-bake oven in some ways, I suppose. And I'm sure you can find many populist preachers who will enjoy saying the same thing---that the Bible is easy to understand, and here, let me tell you right now what it means!

But I think we've already demonstrated in this podcast that not every passage is easy---and that some of them require lots and lots of homework and pondering if we're going to interpret them rightly.

But The Living Bible wants to put this verse to us this way. Here, I'll read it again:

Romans 13:1 Obey the government, for God is the one who put it there. All governments have been placed in power by God.

And from this, we're supposed to get the same impression that The Living Bible's team got: That you're in sin if you don't obey your government.

And that's it. Case closed. Conclusion drawn. If you defy your government, you're defying God.

Now, that's not MY conclusion, mind you. That's the popular one that The Living Bible and several other Bible versions want you to have. And I'm sure there are a great many preachers who want you to have that impression of it. Oh, and I would imagine---and you can call me a conspiracy theorist if you like---but who else would you imagine might really LIKE this reading of Romans 13:1? How about governments? Do you think that THEY might like this rendering?

Well, you can ponder that, but I want to put you in a really difficult spot over this. If it's a sin to disobey your government, then I think you ought to be intellectually obligated to tell me whether the following Bible characters were in sin or not:

- The Hebrew midwives who refused to help Pharaoh kill the Hebrew babies.
- The Magi when they refused to tell Herod where the baby Jesus was.
- Shadrach, Meshack, and Abednego when they refused to bow to the statue of Nebuchadnezzar, even though it was decreed by the king that they all should do it.
- Daniel when he refused to eat the food the king had ordered him to eat.
- The apostles when they refused to quit preaching Jesus, even though the ruling council had ordered them to stop.
- Oh, and I dare not leave out that time that all the Hebrew slaves in Egypt—and scholars tell us there might have been about a million of them—when they all defied the government and left Egypt. And did I mention who led the rebellion? It was God himself.

Were all these people in sin when they did these things—for which they are famous to all Bible readers?

Or how about Jesus when he refused to answer the questions put to him by those in official seats of power? Was he in sin for defying them?

If you're like most people, you're probably troubled at least a little bit by these questions. In one way, you think generally that disobeying those in government is indeed a sin in God's eyes (because of Romans 13:1), yet you realize that in every case, these people did the right thing in the eyes of God, and doing the right thing is the very definition in your mind of NOT sinning.

So you're in a bind. You're between a rock and a hard place. You want to be faithful to scripture, yet you don't really understand why there would be such a command or decree from God. So you have cognitive dissonance going on in your mind. That is, you have two or more thoughts that disagree with one another, yet you try your best to hold on to both at the same time. Cognitive scientists call this "cognitive dissonance", but the Bible authors called it "double-mindedness".

Now, some people out there will get around this---they try to relieve the cognitive dissonance--by discounting Paul, the apostle who wrote this passage. And that's a very problematic tactic, mind you. Indeed, by this same tactic, a great many things in scripture that people don't like can simply be ignored—because they come from the pen of Paul. They'll try to make the case that Paul taught things different from what Jesus taught, and should, therefore, be shunned. Never mind, they say, that Peter referred to Paul's writings as "scripture". I think we covered that one in Episode 1, by the way.

So, I think the camp that tries to weasel their way out of this by discounting everything that Paul wrote is treading some dangerous waters—"to their own destruction", as Peter put it.

Meanwhile, many others decide to navigate this passage by simply letting the cognitive dissonance remain in their minds. No matter what seems rational and reasonable and responsible to them about how we should act, they will tell themselves, "But it says it right there in Romans 13:1!..."

Well, my question to them is "Does it?"

Does it say what you think it says? Have you looked into that, or are you being like practically everybody else in our meme culture—our hearsay culture—and merely taking somebody else’s word for it?

Let’s review those three funny quotes about government from earlier. And listen carefully, because I’m going to change some of the wording. See if you can catch the changes:

Here’s my new version of the Ronald Reagan quote:

"The nine most terrifying words in the English language are: *I'm from the Higher Powers, and I'm here to help.*"

And here’s the one attributed to Mark Twain:

"We have the best *Higher Powers* that money can buy!"

And finally, from Will Rogers:

"Be thankful we’re not getting all the *Higher Powers* we’re paying for!"

Obviously, I replaced the word “government” with the phrase “Higher Powers”. So my question for you is “does this make a difference?” Does that change the way you interpret the sentences?

It certainly ought to, because it’s very likely that not one single time in your life have you EVER heard anybody refer to the United States Government, or to your state government, or to your county or city government as “Higher Powers”.

I searched multiple Bible versions for this verse---which is very easy to do with certain Bible software, or with certain Bible websites, such as Biblegateway.com or Biblehub.com—and probably with BlueLetterBible.com. I got back 39 different versions of the passage, and 12 of them render this as either “higher powers” or “higher authorities”. And why do they do it? They do it because they are translating the original Koine Greek in which Paul wrote the letter to the Romans.

The Greek uses the words, we would naturally translated to “powers” or “authorities” and “higher”. This passage in Greek puts the adjective after the

noun, as was more common in earlier English than it is now. We see this, for example, in the popular film title, Mission Impossible, where it would be more common in everyday American English to refer to an “impossible mission”. But the word order here means nothing. It’s a noun (for powers or authorities) and an adjective that modifies that noun—the adjective being “higher”. And the words in Greek are these: For powers or authorities, the Greek lemma ---that is, the core of the word, without whatever prefixes or suffixes may be attached to denote its specific role in the grammar of a sentence---so the lemma of the word here is *exousia*, and the lemma for “higher” is *hyperechō*.

Fourteen of these 60 Bible versions give a very straightforward rendering of these two Greek words. They translate them as “higher powers” or “higher authorities”, and two have it as “superior authorities”. And when we come across language like this, we naturally—and rightly—think to ourselves, “Hmmm, what might that be talking about?” And if we’re asking that question, we’re doing a very good thing, for we’re setting the stage to go do some Bible study, and to figure it out.

But the remainder of these other Bible versions obscure that original language somewhat, and their translating (or paraphrasing) teams decide *for us* what the author, Paul, meant by “higher powers”. Most of them decide that it’s a reference to ordinary human governments. 35 of them use phrases that include the word government or governing. The most popular phrase of this sort is “governing authorities”, which occurs 26 times in the 60 Bible versions surveyed. But when you read “governing authorities”, are you as apt to think to yourself, “Hmmm, what might that be talking about?” Or are you more apt to assume that you KNOW that this must be talking about “the government”? As in, the federal, state, county, or city government that we talk about every day here in this country?

Eight of these 60 Bible versions come right out and use the exact words, “the government”.

But let me ask you this. If you were to read the sentence “Obey the government.” would you think to yourself, “Hmmm, I wonder if Paul is referring to the higher powers here”?

No, you probably wouldn't. And why would you? You'd have no reason to know that Paul had used that kind of language here---unless the translator renders it that way, or unless you are the kind of diligent Bible student that looks these things up in order to pierce the translator's veil and to get back to the original language.

So, unfortunately, you just can't assume that the Bible authors wrote everything the same way that the translators and paraphrasers render it for you. And this fact alone rules out the cognitive miser from ever understanding a great many Bible passages that just aren't as easy as the translators and/or paraphrasers are trying to make it seem. You have to remember that these are people, too, and that their judgments and paradigms and values aren't all perfect. And if they think they understand a passage---even if they're wrong--- many of them are going to be quite content to TELL YOU WHAT IT MEANS (according to what THEY think it means), rather than to translate what it actually SAYS.

What you want---assuming you're not a confirmed cognitive miser who doesn't really care what the original said---what you want is to be told what the author wrote, even if you have to figure out what it means by your own study. What you do NOT want is to be told what the translator or paraphraser thinks the author MEANS---because what if the translator or paraphraser is wrong? Then you're stuck with the wrong idea in your head, and you go around repeating it like a meme---like hearsay---to others, and it spreads like a virus---along with all its implications and consequences.

So, Paul wrote the equivalent of "higher powers". And that puts it back on us to figure that out, or to decide that we don't want to go to the trouble. And if we don't think it's worth our trouble, we still have to decide how we're going to handle this verse. And I'm betting that most people are going to find it easier to just go with "the government"---even if it causes them cognitive dissonance between that idea and the idea that human governments do sometimes do things wrong and do sometimes put people in a position in which the right thing to do is to disobey the government.

But the best people in the world to have cognitive dissonance are indeed the cognitive/moral misers, for they don't want to do the work necessary to run a tight ship in their minds. It's OK with them if it's messy inside their minds. They

don't pay much attention to principles and precepts and order and such, so what do they care if things don't make sense?

What they WILL do, however, is to try to get OTHERS to cut it out with the principles and precepts and with examination and discussion. That makes them at least as uncomfortable as does trying to figure these things out for themselves. So they're going to want to shut you down, you diligent Bible student---for you hashing these things out just brings it up all over again for people who've already decided not to care. And they'll sometimes cheat to get you to shut down your thinking on the subject. They'll call you "worldly" or "prideful" (which, when translated from church talk to standard American English, is "proud"). They may even call you "divisive". Or they'll find some other thought-stopper to try to dissuade you from the topic. That's what the cognitive/moral miser is often willing to do in order to preserve his or her own intellectual negligence in relative peace. Yes, they still have the cognitive dissonance of competing ideas going on in their minds, but it's much easier to distract themselves from that in various ways without other people bringing up the subject again and again.

So, where were we?

We were noting how the Greek has "higher powers"---or something quite like that---and that we don't naturally know right off hand what that was supposed to mean.

So let's do some Bible study.

Right off the bat, I can tell you that this pair of words does not appear together anywhere else in the Bible. The word for "higher" (which is *hyperecho*) appears only 5 times in the original-Greek books of the Bible, and seven times in the Septuagint, which is the Greek translation of the original-Hebrew-and-Aramaic books—frequently referred to as "the Old Testament"—and if you heard episode 7, you'll know why I don't like that designation.

So this raises the question as to what was meant by these "higher powers". We can't just go look it up elsewhere in the Bible. So we have to do some thinking here.

We could, for example, ask the question "Higher than WHAT?" That is, of all the powers there are, which of them are higher than others?

Well, God, of course, would be the highest power of all—quite obviously. Yet, this passage is talking about powers having been instituted BY God, and not about God himself. So we can safely cross God off the list as the power that is being discussed.

Further, we can note that powers here is in the plural, and not in the singular. And if it were talking about God himself, we would naturally expect to find it in the singular.

So, we have multiple powers, higher than something—yet lower than God.

Well, humans are lower than God. And among human cultures, certain authorities have been established, with some humans being of higher authority than others. Indeed, this might seem the most commonplace possibility---and many of these Bible versions seem to have taken this very position. But remember, if we take this position, we have to go back and explain all the civil disobedience from the heroes of the Bible, and explain how that's not sin on their part---OR, we have to explain how it WAS sin on their part, and yet they were COMMENDED for it in the Bible! And that's a hard task.

But there's another possibility that bears searching out—unless we can rule it out somehow. When it comes to powers or authorities, who else was created or established into the order of things that contains God and man? Let me quote a portion of Psalm 8 for you to refresh your memory:

Psalm 8: what is mankind that you are mindful of them,
human beings that you care for them?^[c]

⁵You have made them^[d] a little lower than **the angels**

Paul was writing to humans about someone having God-given authority over them. Meanwhile we see in Psalm 8 that mankind himself was made a little lower than the angels. So there's a plural class of beings that seem to have had some level of power higher than that of mankind.

Could this be what we're looking for? Could this be the "higher powers" to which Paul was referring? I think this definitely bears out examination. And we may well discover that it's also worth examining whether some subset of all the angels could have been in view.

So, before we go further with the angel investigation, let me add some credibility to this line of investigation by quoting yet another verse by Paul—and this verse uses this same Greek word for “powers”, which is *exousia*. It’s a very famous verse that you will likely find familiar. So listen while I read Ephesians 6:12, where Paul describes the struggle they were in at that time:

Ephesians 6:12 For our wrestling is not against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the **powers**, against the world-rulers of this darkness, against the spiritual *hosts* of wickedness in the heavenly *places*.

Now, this is from the American Standard Version, or ASV. Did you notice that word “powers” in there? It’s the same Greek word that Paul used in Romans 13, regarding who was to be obeyed. And yet here, the context makes it very clear that it’s not humans who are in view, for he explicitly says not only that this battle was “not against flesh and blood”, but against the principalities, powers, world-rulers, and spiritual wickedness in the heavenlies. (The word “places” is put here to help it make more sense to the English reader. In fact, a couple of other versions here have “high places”).

We would have to strain against some of the particulars of this passage, therefore, to insist that Paul was describing a wrestling match between Christians (or the apostles) and other humans.

Now, someone might try to seize upon this one term in here, where they are called “world-rulers of this darkness”. They might assume that this is a reference to human kings or governors. But I can show you three more passages where language like this is used to refer to Satan. I’ll show you three passages---all from John’s account of the end of Jesus’ life. Let’s look first in

[John 12:31](#) Now is the judgment of this **world**; now will the **ruler** of this **world** be cast out.

[John 14:30](#) I will no longer talk much with you, for the **ruler** of this **world** is coming. He has no claim on me,

[John 16:11](#) concerning judgment, because the **ruler** of this **world** is judged.

So, where Paul in Ephesians refers to spiritual beings in the heavenlies as “world-rulers of this darkness”, Jesus referred to Satan three times—as far as we have on record—as “the ruler of this world”.

Now, I realize that this opens up a whole new can of worms for most Christians. They have been taught to think that God and Jesus are the rulers of this world, and that that's all there is to it. But here is Jesus on the record referring three times to Satan as the ruler of this world.

Indeed, Paul seems to have had the same thing in mind in 2 Corinthians when he refers to Satan as the “god” (little g) of this world:

2 Corinthians 4: ³ And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. ⁴ In their case **the god of this world** has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the **image** of God.

It's an intriguing question: How did Satan get to be the god of this world, or the ruler of this world. What were the events surrounding that? Well, I'm still working on that puzzle myself and am far from being ready to explain it all. But besides that, we don't have time to go down that road while working on this present topic. So I'm sorry to disappoint—but I can promise that in the distant future, we will address this question again---for this question has lots of tentacles that reach into how we handle other questions, too. It is an important question that deserves our careful attention.

So let me sum up where we are so far and I'll end this Part A and we'll pick it up again in Part B.

We're trying to figure out who these “higher powers” were that Paul told the Romans had to be obeyed—as they were appointed by God. We've decided to do our due diligence and to look deeper than the mere assumption that they must have been humans. And we've done enough homework so far to see that this word for “powers” (exousia) is indeed used in **some** passages to speak of divine beings.

And here's another reference from Paul about Satan being the ruler—and we need to look closely at this, because there's another clue here for our investigation:

Ephesians 2:1 And you were dead in the trespasses and sins ² in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the **prince of the**

power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—

This is from the English Standard Version and the Greek here is talking about a singular “prince” or “archon” over the “powers” (which is plural in the Greek, even though the ESV puts it in the singular)—so there are plural powers of the air. And the word for “powers” here is the same word—*exousia*—as in the “higher powers” passage in Romans 13:1.

Now, what does this “of the air” part mean exactly? Well, the short answer is, I don’t know offhand, because everywhere else in the Bible that “of the air” is used, it’s in relation to “birds of the air”. “Of the air” occurs 23 times, and in the first 22 occurrences, it’s used in “birds of the air”. And then the last time it occurs, it’s here, where suddenly, it refers to the “prince of the powers of the air”. But perhaps this is not all that hard to figure out—at least in broad terms. That is to say that we started this discussion with “higher powers” and then we got into certain spiritual powers being “in the heavenly places” or “in the heavenlies” or “in the high places”. And now we see a plurality of these powers being described here as “in the air”.

And we see from Romans 13:1 that God had put them there and that they were to be obeyed by the Christians.

And I’m sure that I’ve already rocked a lot of boats pretty hard, because most modern Christians---while they believe in angels, have not done much work at all to understand what all was going on with the angels. The typical Christian view today regarding the divine cast of characters in the Bible is much too small a view. If you talk to many Christians about such things, you’ll find that while they may be aware that God created lots and lots of angels, that their PRACTICAL understanding of it is very limited indeed. They tend to think in terms of God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit--- and then Satan---and if they’re particularly aware, they might throw Michael or Gabriel in there. And they may or may not be aware that Satan was an angel. But fewer still are aware that he had a third of the angels of God under his control---that there was a hierarchy like that. And they’re also not aware that when God took Israel to be his own chosen people, and the nation of his inheritance, that he put high-ranking angel-types in charge of the OTHER nations.

So, if you've thought that this study so far is a big can of worms, there's much more yet to come. And it may well blow your minds if you're not already familiar with these things. But I hope that I have at least succeeded so far in opening your eyes to the possibility that Romans 13:1 just might not be about human governments. And I hope also that I've got you where you're willing to be honest about the terrible cognitive dissonance that comes about if we decide that it is.

So, go listen to Episode 10 right now, and I'll continue where I've left off here.

+++++