

The Sanctity of Life, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 11: Government, Capital Punishment, and War

Romans 13:1–7

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Doctrinally, this lesson concerns the God-ordained role of civil government and the difficult questions of capital punishment and the Christian's relationship to war and the use of lethal force. Romans 13:1–7 teaches that governing authorities are instituted by God to restrain and punish evil, bearing the sword as God's servants; Genesis 9:5–6 grounds the gravity of bloodshed in the image of God. At the same time, Jesus taught His disciples a personal ethic of nonretaliation and love of enemies (Matthew 5:38–48; Romans 12:17–21). The teacher's task is to present this biblical material fully and evenhandedly, helping the class hold together the role of the state and the ethic of the disciple.

What makes this lesson distinctive is that it concerns areas where faithful, conscientious Christians have long and sincerely differed. Some hold that government may rightly use the sword, including capital punishment and just war; others hold to nonviolence and oppose the taking of life even by the state. This study does not bind a single political position on the class. The lesson should inform and form the conscience from Scripture, present the strongest considerations on more than one side, acknowledge the range of sincere views among brethren, and keep the tone humble and irenic throughout. It must also, as the whole study requires, refuse to align with any political party, candidate, or movement.

Formationally, the lesson aims to cultivate a Scripture-shaped, charitable conscience, and to address the heart's own desire for vengeance. The class should leave better able to think biblically rather than merely along partisan lines, more humble toward believers who differ, more trusting of God's justice, and more committed both to reverence for life and to the personal ethic of love and nonretaliation Jesus taught. Teach this with unusual care to be fair, gentle, and free of political partisanship.

Question 1

Student Question:

Read Romans 13:1–4. Paul teaches that governing authorities are “instituted by God” and that the ruler is “God’s servant for your good.” What does it mean that civil government is part of God’s ordering of the world, and what is its God-given purpose?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin with Paul's foundational claim in Romans 13:1–4: governing authorities are “instituted by God,” and the ruler is “God's servant for your good.” Civil government is not a necessary evil or

a merely human invention; it is part of God's ordering of a fallen world, given to restrain evil and promote good.

Draw out the God-given purpose of government. Paul describes it as a servant for our good, approving the good and bearing the sword against wrongdoing. Its purpose is the maintenance of justice and order, the restraint of evil, and the protection of the innocent. This is a genuine ministry within God's providence, even when carried out by imperfect rulers.

Note the context, which makes Paul's teaching more striking. He wrote under Rome, a pagan and often hostile government. Yet he still affirmed that authority as instituted by God for the purpose of order and justice. This guards against both an idolizing of government and a contempt for it; government is God's servant for a limited, good purpose, accountable to Him.

Set up the lesson's tension. Establishing that government is God-ordained to restrain evil, including by the sword, raises the hard questions of capital punishment and war that the lesson will address. Lay this foundation carefully and fairly, without yet drawing conclusions on the contested applications.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Civil government as instituted by God, not merely a human invention (Romans 13:1).
- The God-given purpose of government: justice, order, restraint of evil, protection of the good.
- Paul's affirmation of authority even under a pagan, hostile government.
- Government as God's servant for a limited, good purpose, accountable to Him.

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that government is instituted by God?
- What is the God-given purpose of civil authority?
- Why is it significant that Paul wrote this under the Roman Empire?

Question 2

Student Question:

How do you tend to regard those in authority over you, government, employers, and other leaders, with respect, suspicion, contempt, or indifference? How does Paul's teaching challenge or refine your attitude?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This first self-examining question turns Paul's teaching toward the student's own attitude to authority. Paul calls for a respectful submission to governing authorities for the Lord's sake. The question asks students to examine how they actually regard those in authority over them.

Help the class be honest about their attitudes. In our age, contempt for authority is common and often celebrated, and believers can absorb a habitually cynical or scornful posture toward leaders. Paul's teaching challenges this, calling for honor and respect, even where we disagree, as part of submission to God's ordering.

Clarify what submission does and does not mean. Honoring authority does not mean blind obedience or approval of all that rulers do; Scripture also shows that we must obey God rather than men when they conflict (Acts 5:29). But the default posture of the Christian is respect and honest engagement, not contempt, paired with prayer for those in authority (1 Timothy 2:1-2).

Move toward a refined attitude. Invite students to examine whether their attitude toward authority has been shaped more by cultural cynicism or partisan loyalty than by Scripture, and to consider one way to honor and pray for those in authority this week, even those they did not vote for or disagree with.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Respectful submission to authority for the Lord's sake (Romans 13:1; 1 Peter 2:13-17).
- The challenge to habitual cynicism and contempt toward leaders.
- Submission as honor and engagement, not blind obedience (Acts 5:29).
- Prayer for those in authority as the Christian's calling (1 Timothy 2:1-2).

Discussion Prompts

- How do you tend to regard those in authority over you?
- How does Paul's teaching challenge cynicism or contempt?
- How can you honor and pray for leaders you disagree with?

Question 3

Student Question:

Read Romans 13:4 again: the authority "does not bear the sword in vain" but is "an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer." How does this passage, together with Genesis 9:5-6, inform the question of whether civil government may rightly use force, including lethal force, to restrain and punish evil?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Focus on the difficult statement of Romans 13:4: the authority "does not bear the sword in vain" but is "an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer." The "sword" implies the coercive power of the state, including, many understand, the power over life in the punishment of grave evil. Genesis 9:5-6 likewise speaks of a reckoning for the shedding of blood.

Present the considerations fairly. Taken together, many faithful Christians understand these passages to teach that civil government may rightly use force, including lethal force, to restrain

and punish evil and to protect the innocent, and that this is part of its God-ordained role. Genesis 9:6, grounding the gravity of murder in the image of God, has long been read as establishing a principle of proportionate justice for the taking of innocent life.

Acknowledge the other reading honestly, since this is contested ground. Other faithful Christians, holding the same Scriptures, emphasize that Genesis 9:6 may describe the tragic cycle of violence rather than prescribe it, that the coming of Christ inaugurates a new ethic, and that the sanctity of life and Jesus' teaching press toward mercy even in matters of justice. The teacher should present the state's authority to bear the sword as the plain reading of Romans 13, while noting that sincere believers differ on how far that authority extends, especially regarding capital punishment.

Keep the focus on Scripture, not partisanship. Resist letting this become a political debate. The aim is to understand what the text says about the God-ordained role of government in restraining evil, and to recognize the genuine interpretive questions that surround its application, holding the discussion with care and charity.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The state's God-given authority to bear the sword against evil (Romans 13:4).
- Genesis 9:5–6 and the principle of a reckoning for the shedding of blood.
- The range of faithful interpretation on how far the state's authority over life extends.
- Keeping the discussion grounded in Scripture rather than partisan debate.

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that the authority does not bear the sword in vain?
- How have faithful Christians understood Genesis 9:5–6 and Romans 13:4?
- Where do sincere believers differ on the application of these texts?

Question 4

Student Question:

This lesson touches matters on which sincere, faithful Christians have long disagreed. How can you study a difficult issue like capital punishment or war with both conviction and humility, holding your views firmly where Scripture is clear and charitably where faithful believers differ?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question addresses how to study a genuinely disputed issue well. The aim is to model a way of holding convictions: firmly where Scripture is clear, and charitably where faithful believers differ. This is a crucial skill for the Christian in a divided age.

Distinguish levels of certainty. Some things Scripture teaches plainly (every life bears God's image; government is ordained by God; we are to love our enemies). Others involve the

application of principles to complex cases (the rightness of capital punishment in a given system, the justice of a particular war), where godly people reason differently. Wisdom holds the clear things firmly and the disputable things humbly.

Commend a posture of humility without relativism. Humility here does not mean having no convictions or treating all views as equally valid; it means recognizing the limits of our certainty on genuinely difficult applications and honoring the sincerity and faithfulness of those who differ. We can hold a view strongly and still refuse to unchurch or despise a brother who disagrees.

Apply this to the class's discussion. Invite students to practice this very posture in the conversation that follows: stating their convictions, listening charitably, grounding their views in Scripture, and extending honor across disagreement. This is itself a formation in Christlikeness.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Holding convictions firmly where Scripture is clear and charitably where it is disputed.
- Distinguishing plain teaching from the application of principles to complex cases.
- Humility that honors sincere believers who differ, without relativism.
- Charitable, Scripture-grounded discussion as formation in Christlikeness.

Discussion Prompts

- How can we tell the difference between clear teaching and disputable application?
- What does humility without relativism look like?
- How can we hold strong views and still honor those who differ?

Question 5

Student Question:

The same Bible that ordains government to restrain evil also records Jesus teaching His followers not to repay evil for evil but to love their enemies (Matthew 5:38-48). How do we honor both the God-ordained role of civil authority and the personal ethic of nonretaliation Jesus taught His disciples?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Bring forward the other side of the biblical material: Jesus' teaching to His disciples not to repay evil for evil but to love their enemies (Matthew 5:38-48), echoed by Paul in Romans 12:17-21, "repay no one evil for evil... never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God." This personal ethic stands alongside the role of government.

Help the class see how these fit together rather than contradict. Many understand Scripture to teach a distinction between the personal ethic of the disciple, who renounces personal vengeance and loves enemies, and the institutional role of government, which God ordains to

restrain evil and execute justice. Notably, Romans 12 (leave vengeance to God) flows right into Romans 13 (government as God's avenger), suggesting that personal nonretaliation and the state's administration of justice are meant to be held together.

Acknowledge again the range of faithful views. Some Christians draw the line such that the believer may serve in roles (soldier, officer) that bear the sword on behalf of the state; others, taking Jesus' teaching as comprehensive, hold to nonviolence even there. Present both as sincere attempts to be faithful to the whole of Scripture, without binding the class to one.

Keep the heart in view. Whatever one concludes about the institutional questions, every disciple is called to renounce personal vengeance and to love their enemies. This is not optional or disputed; it is the plain command of Christ. Lead the class to embrace this personal ethic even as they reason about the harder institutional questions.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Jesus' command of nonretaliation and love of enemies for His disciples (Matthew 5:38–48).
- The personal ethic of the disciple alongside the institutional role of government (Romans 12–13).
- The range of faithful views on the believer's participation in the sword-bearing roles of the state.
- Personal renunciation of vengeance and love of enemies as the plain, undisputed command of Christ.

Discussion Prompts

- How do the personal ethic of nonretaliation and the role of government fit together?
- Why is it significant that Romans 12 flows directly into Romans 13?
- What part of Jesus' teaching here is not disputed among faithful believers?

Question 6

Student Question:

Where in your own heart do you find a desire for vengeance or retaliation when you are wronged? How does Jesus' call to love enemies and leave vengeance to God reshape the way you respond to those who hurt you?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question brings the matter of vengeance home to the heart. Long before we debate capital punishment or war, most of us wrestle with the desire to retaliate when we are personally wronged. Jesus' command to love enemies confronts that desire directly.

Help students recognize the desire for vengeance in its everyday forms: the grudge, the cutting reply, the secret wish for someone's downfall, the refusal to forgive. These are the seeds of the very violence the lesson considers, and they live in ordinary hearts.

Point to Jesus' remedy. He calls us not to repay evil for evil but to love our enemies, to bless those who curse us, and to leave vengeance to God, who judges justly. This is not weakness or the denial of justice; it is trust that God will set all things right, freeing us from the burden of revenge.

Move toward a concrete reshaping of response. Invite each student to identify where they harbor a desire for retaliation and to take one step toward loving an enemy and entrusting justice to God this week. The personal ethic Jesus taught is meant to be practiced, not merely admired.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The everyday desire for vengeance as the seed of larger violence.
- Jesus' call to love enemies and renounce personal retaliation (Matthew 5:44).
- Leaving vengeance to God who judges justly, not denying justice (Romans 12:19).
- The personal ethic of love and nonretaliation as something to be practiced.

Discussion Prompts

- Where do you find a desire for vengeance when you are wronged?
- How does Jesus' command reshape your response to those who hurt you?
- What does it mean to leave vengeance to God?

Question 7

Student Question:

Genesis 9:5–6 grounds the gravity of taking human life in the image of God, and on that very basis speaks of a reckoning for the shedding of blood. How does the sanctity of life inform the way we think about both the punishment of murder and the protection of the innocent?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Return to Genesis 9:5–6 and draw out its dual significance. The same verse that establishes a reckoning for the shedding of blood grounds that reckoning in the image of God: "for God made man in his own image." The gravity of taking human life and the worth of human life are bound together in one sentence.

Help the class see both implications. On one hand, the image of God makes the taking of innocent life so grave that it calls for justice; this is part of why many understand the verse to support a proportionate response to murder. On the other hand, the image of God in every

person, including the wrongdoer, presses us toward sobriety and away from a casual or vengeful attitude toward any human life.

Hold the tension honestly. The sanctity of life informs both the punishment of murder and the protection of the innocent, and faithful Christians weigh these emphases differently. Some stress that justice for the innocent victim honors the image of God; others stress that the image of God in the offender calls for restraint and mercy. Both are reasoning from the same sacredness of life.

Keep the focus on reverence for life. Whatever one concludes about the institutional questions, Genesis 9 teaches that human life is so sacred, because it bears God's image, that its taking is never a light matter. Lead the class to let that reverence govern their thinking on all these questions, restraining both bloodthirstiness and indifference.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The gravity of bloodshed and the worth of life bound together in the image of God (Genesis 9:5–6).
- The image of God informing both justice for the victim and restraint toward the offender.
- Faithful Christians weighing these emphases differently from the same sacredness of life.
- Reverence for life governing our thinking, against both bloodthirstiness and indifference.

Discussion Prompts

- How does Genesis 9 connect the gravity of bloodshed to the image of God?
- How does the image of God speak both to justice and to restraint?
- How should reverence for life govern our thinking on these questions?

Question 8

Student Question:

When you consider hard questions like capital punishment and war, are you more shaped by Scripture and conscience or by the political tribe you identify with? What would it look like to let God's Word, rather than partisan loyalty, form your convictions?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question presses one of the study's consistent concerns: whether our convictions on hard questions are shaped by Scripture or by partisan loyalty. On capital punishment and war especially, believers often adopt the position of their political tribe without serious biblical reflection.

Help the class examine themselves honestly. It is easy to assume our political side's view is simply the Christian view, and to read Scripture through the lens of our tribe rather than the

reverse. The call here is to let God's Word stand over our politics, including where it unsettles the positions our side takes for granted.

Be explicit about avoiding partisanship, as the study requires. The believer's convictions on these questions should be grounded in Scripture and conscience, not in allegiance to any party, candidate, or movement. This may mean holding views that do not fit neatly into any political camp, which is often a sign that Scripture, rather than tribe, is doing the shaping.

Move toward a Scripture-formed conscience. Invite students to identify one position they may hold mostly out of political loyalty and to bring it honestly before Scripture this week, willing to be corrected. The goal is a conscience formed by the Word, free from the captivity of partisan identity.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The temptation to let partisan loyalty rather than Scripture shape our convictions.
- Letting God's Word stand over our politics, even where it unsettles our side.
- Grounding convictions in Scripture and conscience, not party or movement.
- A Scripture-formed conscience free from the captivity of partisan identity.

Discussion Prompts

- Are your views on these issues shaped more by Scripture or by your political tribe?
- What would it look like to let God's Word stand over your politics?
- What position might you need to bring honestly before Scripture this week?

Question 9

Student Question:

Faithful Christians hold a range of views on capital punishment and the Christian's relationship to war and lethal force, from those who believe government may rightly use the sword to those who hold to nonviolence. Lay out the main biblical considerations on each side: the sanctity of life and Jesus' teaching on nonretaliation and love of enemies, and the God-ordained role of government that "does not bear the sword in vain." How should the conscience be formed from Scripture on these questions, and why is humility toward fellow believers appropriate here?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal block, and it must be handled with unusual evenhandedness and humility, for it concerns matters on which faithful Christians sincerely differ. The teacher's task is not to settle the questions for the class but to lay out the main biblical considerations fairly and to model a Scripture-formed, charitable conscience.

Lay out the considerations that incline many toward affirming the state's use of the sword. Romans 13 plainly presents government as God's servant, bearing the sword and executing

God's wrath on wrongdoers, which suggests a God-ordained authority to use force, and even lethal force, to restrain evil and protect the innocent. Genesis 9:6 has long been understood to establish proportionate justice for murder. On this reading, capital punishment justly applied, and just defensive war, can be legitimate exercises of the authority God has given the state.

Lay out, just as fairly, the considerations that incline others toward nonviolence or opposition to capital punishment. The sanctity of every life made in God's image, Jesus' teaching to love enemies and not resist the evildoer, the church's call to embody a different kingdom, and the grave fallibility and injustice often present in human systems all press some faithful believers toward mercy and away from the taking of life, even by the state. They argue that the disciple of the Prince of Peace should err on the side of life. Present this case with the same respect given to the other.

Guide the conscience and counsel humility. Conclude not with a verdict but with direction: form your conscience by taking all of Scripture seriously, the role of government and the ethic of Jesus, the justice due to victims and the mercy due to all image-bearers; refuse to let partisan identity do your thinking; hold your conclusion with conviction but your brother with charity. Because Scripture is clear that these are matters where godly people differ, humility is not weakness here but faithfulness. The unity of the body does not require uniformity on these disputed questions; it requires that we love one another and submit together to the Word.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The biblical case for the state's rightful use of the sword (Romans 13:4; Genesis 9:6).
- The biblical case for nonviolence and mercy from the sanctity of life and Jesus' teaching (Matthew 5:38–48).
- Forming the conscience by taking all of Scripture seriously, not a single text or a partisan view.
- Humility and charity toward fellow believers as faithfulness, not weakness, on disputed questions.
- Unity of the body requiring love and submission to the Word, not uniformity on these matters.

Discussion Prompts

- What are the strongest biblical considerations on each side of these questions?
- How should the conscience be formed from the whole of Scripture?
- Why is humility toward fellow believers especially appropriate here?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over Romans 13:1–7 and Genesis 9:5–6. Name one specific way this lesson is forming your conscience or your attitude toward authority, justice, or your enemies, and one concrete step you will take this week to live out both reverence for life and trust in God’s justice.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The capstone question gathers Romans 13:1–7 and Genesis 9:5–6 and asks for a personal response focused on the conscience and the heart, rather than on settling the institutional debates. The aim is formation, not the adoption of a particular political position.

Press for one specific way the lesson is forming the student. For one it may be a more respectful, prayerful attitude toward authority; for another, the surrender of a desire for vengeance; for another, a new humility toward believers who differ; for another, a resolve to let Scripture rather than party shape their convictions.

Then ask for one concrete step that holds together reverence for life and trust in God’s justice. This might be praying for those in authority, forgiving an enemy and leaving justice to God, studying these questions more carefully in Scripture, or engaging a disagreement with new charity. The step should embody the lesson’s twin themes.

Close with the irenic spirit the lesson requires. The goal is a thoughtful, Scripture-shaped, charitable conscience that reveres every life and trusts the just God who will one day set all things right. Send the class home holding their convictions with both firmness and humility, and prepared for the study’s closing call to choose life and walk humbly with God.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Personal formation of conscience and heart over the adoption of a political position.
- A respectful attitude toward authority and the surrender of personal vengeance.
- Reverence for life held together with trust in God’s justice.
- Convictions held with both firmness and humility in an irenic spirit.

Discussion Prompts

- How is this lesson forming your conscience or your attitude toward authority and enemies?
- What concrete step will you take this week to live out reverence for life and trust in God’s justice?
- How can you hold your convictions with both firmness and humility?