

# DUAL ETHICS IN ROMANS 13

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## 1. Introduction

Seemingly Rom 13 demands the people's unconditional submission to the state.<sup>1</sup> But what if the state's policy contradicts God's teachings? I first survey various answers to the problem. As we will see, those answers assume that what is morally wrong for the state to order is morally wrong for the people to follow. I argue, however, that there can be cases where a state's policy is morally wrong while the people's submission to it is morally right. I distinguish between the ethical standards for the state and those for the people. I point out the following: The dual ethics protects conscientious people from moral blame for having obeyed the authority. The dual ethics makes it impossible to appeal to Rom 13 to justify tyranny. The dual ethics is also compatible with the various answers. Finally, I show that some New Testament passages support the dual ethics.

## 2. Romans 13

In Rom 13, Paul calls for the people's submission to the state. The passage reads as follows:

<sup>1</sup>Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. <sup>2</sup>Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. <sup>3</sup>For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. <sup>4</sup>For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. <sup>5</sup>Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience. <sup>6</sup>This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full

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<sup>1</sup>In this essay, Rom 13 refers to Rom 13:1-7 unless otherwise noted.

time to governing. <sup>7</sup>Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor (Rom 13:1-7).<sup>2</sup>

Thus, the passage demands the people's submission to the state.<sup>3</sup> In verses 1 and 2, three times Paul declares that God has established all "the governing authorities." In verses 4 and 6, three times Paul describes "the one in authority" as "God's servant." Those are the reason that the people should obey the authority. Seemingly the passage demands their unconditional submission to the state.

But what if the state's policy contradicts God's teachings? Klaus Nürnberger says: "Romans 13 contains no indication concerning *the status of these authorities should they fail* to fulfil their divine purpose." "Romans 13 also says nothing about the *required stance of believers* in such an eventuality."<sup>4</sup> Some appeal to Rom 13 to justify tyranny. According to Neil Elliott, Rom 13 "served to stifle Christian opposition to Nazi policies, indeed to promote enthusiasm for Hitler in ecclesiastical councils." In South Africa, Rom 13 was "quoted to defend apartheid in official declarations of the Dutch Reformed Church." Rom 13 was "as important a component of tyranny in Central America, where Evangelical pastors insist that 'the Bible says that we must obey the President.'"<sup>5</sup> Besides, just war theories appeal to the passage for their ground. For instance, Christian just war theorist Jean Bethke Elshtain regards Rom 13 as "[t]he most famous – and to Christian pacifists nigh-infamous – passage."<sup>6</sup> Apart from whether just war theories are morally right or wrong, we can see the political implications of Rom 13. Does the passage

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<sup>2</sup>As a Bible translation, I used the New International Version (NIV).

<sup>3</sup>There are similar passages in the Bible: "Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you" (Heb 13:17). "Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right" (1 Pet 2:13-14).

<sup>4</sup>Klaus Nürnberger, "Justice and Force (A Biblical Reflection on Romans 13)," in *Conflict and the Quest for Justice*, eds. Klaus Nürnberger, John Tooke and William Domeris, Pietermaritzburg: Encounter, 1989, 112.

<sup>5</sup>Neil Elliott, *Liberating Paul: The Justice of God and the Politics of the Apostle*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994, 13-14.

<sup>6</sup>Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Just War against Terror: The Burden of American Power in a Violent World*, New York: Basic Books, 2003, 51.

morally justify any policy of the state? If so, for example, not only the tyrannical policies of the states just mentioned but those of Stalin’s Russia and Pol Pot’s Cambodia including genocide become morally justified. This seems problematic.

Scholars have provided various answers to the problem which arises when the state’s policy contradicts God’s teachings. In the next section, let us see those answers.

### 3. Various Answers to the Problem

Surveying various interpretations of Rom 13, B. C. Lategan finds six answers to the problem which arises when the state’s policy contradicts God’s teachings. First, the “*intertextual move*.” This places Rom 13 in the wider context including other parts of the New Testament or of the Bible.<sup>7</sup> For example, Rom 12 and Rom 13:8-14, which preach love for everyone, provide context for the passage. Rev 13 shows that the state can be demonic. Dan 7 depicts Rome as the “fourth beast—terrifying and frightening and very powerful. It had large iron teeth; it crushed and devoured its victims and trampled underfoot whatever was left” (Dan 7:7). Matt 20:24-28; Mark 10:41-45; and Luke 22:24-27 show that Jesus criticized the way in which rulers exercise their authority. Mark 15:1-5; Luke 23:8-9; and John 19:8-11 show that Jesus himself did not always obey the authority. Peter and the other apostles say, “We must obey God rather than men!” (Acts 5:29; see also 4:18-19). The Book of Revelation demands loyal believers to keep God’s commands in the face of political pressure to the contrary. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refused to worship the image of gold set up by King Nebuchadnezzar against his order because they considered that his order conflicts with the law of their God (Dan 3:13-18). Paul’s following words show little of servile submission to the authority: “They beat us publicly without a trial, even though we are Roman citizens, and threw us into prison. And now do they want to get rid of us quietly? No! Let them come themselves and escort us out” (Acts 16:37). The intertextual move holds that those passages undermine the seemingly unconditional demand for submission.

Second, the “*evaluative move*.” This introduces “a criterion to distinguish between good and bad government.” Rom 13:3 says that “rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong.”

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<sup>7</sup>B. C. Lategan, “Reception: Theory and Practice in Reading Romans 13,” *Text and Interpretation: New Approaches in the Criticism of the New Testament*, eds. P. J. Hartin and J. H. Petzer, Leiden, the Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1991, 166.

So, rulers who exercise terror against “those who do right” are not good rulers. Rom 13:4 says that a ruler is “God’s servant to do you good.” Thus, a ruler who is not God’s servant or does not do you good does not deserve obedience. Also, the “conscience” in Rom 13:5 “carries with it the potential for criticism and resistance to the state.” Another standard is that “all authority is instituted by God and, therefore, accountable to Him. Those who do not fulfil this responsibility cannot claim obedience to themselves.”<sup>8</sup> Besides, Rom 13:7 says, “Give everyone what you owe him.” As James Moulder points out, “we cannot always obey our governments *and* discharge our obligations to all men. More specifically, it is possible to find ourselves in situations where obedience to our government requires us to wrong a neighbour.”<sup>9</sup> Also, Rom 13:3 says, “do what is right.” Rom 12:2 says, “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” Moulder claims that those three imperatives in Rom 13:7, 13:3, and 12:2 undermine the seemingly unconditional demand for submission.<sup>10</sup>

Third, the “*interpolation move*.” This declares “the passage to be so unPauline in spirit or so incompatible with the rest of his thought that it could only be a *Fremdkörper* [foreign material] that was inserted into the text at a later stage.”<sup>11</sup>

Fourth, “[*r*]elativisation by restricting the universal scope of Romans 13.” This limits the scope of the passage “to a specific situation (the circumstances of the Christian community in Rome) or a specific problem (revolutionaries contemplating the overthrow of the regime or enthusiasts disregarding worldly authorities).”<sup>12</sup> For example, Marcus Borg argues that in Rom 13 Paul is not speaking of government in general, but of the Roman government at his time.<sup>13</sup> Frank Stagg insists that “Paul’s stress

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<sup>8</sup>Lategan, “Reception,” 166.

<sup>9</sup>James Moulder, “Romans 13 and Conscientious Disobedience,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 21, 1977, 21.

<sup>10</sup>Moulder, “Romans 13 and Conscientious Disobedience,” 20-22.

<sup>11</sup>Lategan, “Reception,” 166. For the interpolation thesis, see, for example, Alex Pallis, *To the Romans: A Commentary*, Liverpool: Liverpool Booksellers’, 1920, 141, James Kallas, “Romans XIII. 1-7: An Interpolation,” *New Testament Studies* 11.4, 1965, 365-74. C. O’Neill, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans*, Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1975, 207-09.

<sup>12</sup>Lategan, “Reception,” 166.

<sup>13</sup>Marcus Borg, “A New Context for Romans XIII,” *New Testament Studies* 19.2, 1973, 216.

upon the Christian’s freedom from the world was vulnerable to becoming an ‘oversell,’ with the consequence that the ‘spiritual’ ones would only despise the world and reject any obligations to it.”<sup>14</sup> According to Stagg, Rom 13 is Paul’s effort to correct this oversell. Similarly, Moulder claims that Paul wrote Rom 13 to combat antinomians who “believed that our faith in Christ emancipates us from all the ordinary obligations and duties which the moral law imposes upon us.”<sup>15</sup>

Fifth, “[r]eading *Romans 13* under different presuppositions.”<sup>16</sup> “Although it is generally accepted that Romans 13 is written under and referring to a non-democratic situation, it can be read ‘under democratic pre-suppositions’.”<sup>17</sup> The democratic presuppositions include, for example, that sovereignty rests with the people, that the people elect their rulers, that the rulers are subject to the people’s scrutiny, that the rulers are accountable to the people, and that the rulers are subject to dismissal by the people. Reading the passage under democratic presuppositions “enables the reader to bring different questions to the text and to draw different conclusions about its contemporary implications.”<sup>18</sup> For example, the readers do not have to accept every policy of the state blindly. They can examine whether a policy accords with their will. They can demand the rulers to account for it. If the readers disagree with the policy, they can ask the rulers to reconsider it. If the rulers do not change the policy, the readers can express their will by vote to recall it or change the rulers.

Sixth, “[r]edefining the authorities.”<sup>19</sup> According to Rom 13, the ‘sword’ means force to punish evil. Taking the democratic reading even further, Nürnberger claims that “the sword ultimately belongs to the ruled. It is only entrusted to the rulers to be used on their behalf.” Nürnberger says, “If the rulers become guilty and do not subject themselves to the scrutiny of the ruled, they forfeit the right to use the sword and *this right returns to the primary authority*. Then they, not the existing rulers, are entitled to use force to curtail evil—even the evil committed by the rulers.”<sup>20</sup> Nürnberger applies this reading even to an undemocratic state,

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<sup>14</sup>Frank Stagg, “Rendering to Caesar What Belongs to Caesar: Christian Engagement with the World,” *Journal of Church and State* 18.1, 1976, 112.

<sup>15</sup>Moulder, “Romans 13 and Conscientious Disobedience,” 17.

<sup>16</sup>Lategan, “Reception,” 166.

<sup>17</sup>Lategan, “Reception,” 160.

<sup>18</sup>Lategan, “Reception,” 166.

<sup>19</sup>Lategan, “Reception,” 166.

<sup>20</sup>Nürnberger, “Justice and Force,” 112.

making it possible that the people under the state justly revolt against tyrannical rulers to displace them and establish democracy. Yet, drawing on Christian just war theory, Nürnberger claims that revolution is legitimate only under the following conditions: (a) “A *just cause*... [T]his would be the abuse of power by ruling elites at the expense of the population as a whole.” (b) “A *just end*... [A] revolution is only legitimate if it aims at the institution of a just state, thus ideally a full democracy.” (c) “*Just means*. The means must reflect the ends.” (d) “*Proportionality*. If the harm done outweighs the good which is achieved, the struggle is not legitimate.”<sup>21</sup> (e) “*Legitimate authority*. A revolution can only be legitimate if it is conducted by legitimate representatives of the population.” (f) “*Success must be likely*, both concerning the overthrow of the illegitimate authority and concerning the institution of a legitimate authority.” (g) “Because any war, including a revolutionary struggle, inevitably causes loss of life, destruction, hardship, traumatized social relationships etc. it can only be legitimate as a *last resort*.”<sup>22</sup> These conditions are necessary to keep revolutionary leaders in check and prevent deviation from the original purpose, that is, establishing democracy.

Besides the second, third, and fourth answers, Douglas Moo’s survey and study find three more answers to the problem which arises when the state’s policy contradicts God’s teachings. Seventh, “Paul is naive about the evil that governments might do or demand that we do.” Eighth, “Paul was demanding submission to the government only for the short interval before the kingdom would be established in power.”<sup>23</sup> Ninth, “Paul demands a ‘submission’ to government: not strict and universal obedience... Christians may continue to ‘submit’ to a particular government (acknowledging their subordination to it generally) even as they, in obedience to a ‘higher’ authority, refuse to do, in a given instance, what that government requires.”<sup>24</sup> Similarly, Moulder distinguishes between rebellion and conscientious disobedience. He argues that although Rom 13 forbids the people’s rebellion against their government, it leaves room for conscientious disobedience.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Nürnberger, “Justice and Force,” 113.

<sup>22</sup>Nürnberger, “Justice and Force,” 114.

<sup>23</sup>Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1996, 807.

<sup>24</sup>Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* 809.

<sup>25</sup>Moulder, “Romans 13 and Conscientious Disobedience.”

Karl Barth reinterprets the word ‘God’ in Rom 13 to deal with the problem. He says, “the emphatic word ‘God’ must not be so interpreted as to contradict the whole theme of the Epistle to the Romans. We must not give to the word ‘God’ the value of a clearly defined, metaphysical entity.”<sup>26</sup> In this way, Barth proposes a way out of the literal reading of Rom 13.

T. L. Carter questions the common understanding that Rom 13 endorses the authority, and suggests that “Paul employs the rhetorical device of irony as a covert way of exposing and subverting the oppressive authority structures of the Roman Empire.”<sup>27</sup> Referring to the abuse of power by the authority in Paul’s time, Carter points out the huge gap between Paul’s words and the reality. Carter argues that Rom 13 is irony by which Paul expresses “his criticism without fear of repercussions from the authorities.”<sup>28</sup>

We have seen various answers to the problem which arises when the state’s policy contradicts God’s teachings. But there are counterarguments to them. On the second answer, Moo remarks that “Paul does not explicitly make our submission conditional on the way a government acts: vv. 3-4 are simply descriptive.” But why does Paul describe government in such a positive way? Moo says, “the answer may be that Paul is describing government as it *should* be.”<sup>29</sup> The fourth answer may be impossible. Moo says, “vv. 1-2 are hard to get around. Paul here goes out of his way to emphasize the universal scope of his demand: ‘every soul’ is to submit; there is ‘no authority’ except by appointment of God.”<sup>30</sup> Besides, from the fact that a state is tyrannical, it does not necessarily follow that God does not approve it. David Whitford points out that “throughout the Scriptures, there is the recurring theme that God at times appoints tyrants to punish people for their iniquity (for example, Babylon was chosen to punish Israel by carrying its citizens into bondage).”<sup>31</sup> The seventh answer is unlikely.

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<sup>26</sup>Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968, 484.

<sup>27</sup>T. L. Carter, “The Irony of Romans 13,” *Novum Testamentum* 46.3, 2004, 212-13.

<sup>28</sup>Carter, “The Irony of Romans 13,” 226.

<sup>29</sup>Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* 809.

<sup>30</sup>Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* 808.

<sup>31</sup>David M. Whitford, “The Duty to Resist Tyranny: The Magdeburg Confession and the Reframing of Romans 13,” *Caritas et Reformatio: Essays on*

John Stott says, “It is evident that Paul was thinking of the state in the ideal. He knew that a Roman procurator had condemned Jesus to death. He also knew from his own experience that Rome was capable of injustice, as when he was beaten without trial in Philippi, although he was a Roman citizen (Acts 16:37).”<sup>32</sup>

My aim is not to judge which interpretation is right or wrong, but to provide a new perspective to think about the problem which arises when the state’s policy contradicts God’s teachings. The answers we have seen assume that what is morally wrong for the state to order is morally wrong for the people to follow. Seemingly those answers do not distinguish between the ethical standards for the state and those for the people. In the next section, I distinguish between them.

#### **4. Dual Ethics for the State and the People**

According to Rom 13, the people’s submission to the state is morally right. I make this valid unless their conscience objects to obeying the authority. On giving priority to conscience over the literal interpretation of Rom 13, I agree with most of the answers we have seen. Conscience seems the most proper standard available for the people. Based on the knowledge available for them, they should judge the state’s policy conscientiously. When their conscience objects, they should follow their conscience.

In democracy, the state’s policy can be checked legitimately by the people’s conscience to some extent. If the people judge that the state’s policy contradicts God’s teachings, they can express their will by vote to recall it or change the rulers. In this point, a democratic state differs significantly from an undemocratic state since in the latter the state’s policy cannot be checked by the people’s conscience legitimately. Nürnberger says: “Under democratic presuppositions God has ... placed an authority above the rulers – to keep the lawlessness of the rulers in check. This authority is the scrutiny of the population.” “Genuine democracy has *institutionalized a peaceful form of revolution* and thus minimized the harm done. Under a democratic system violence is unnecessary and unjustified because blunderers and abusers of power can

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*Church and Society in Honor of Carter Lindberg*, ed. David M. Whitford, St. Louis: Concordia Academic Press, 2002, 92.

<sup>32</sup>John R. W. Stott, “Christian Responses to Good and Evil: A study of Romans 12:9-13:10,” *Perspectives on Peacemaking: Biblical Options in the Nuclear Age*, ed. John A. Bernbaum, Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1984, 51.



be removed from office without bloodshed.”<sup>33</sup> However, even in democracy, it is not always possible to displace tyrannical rulers by vote. For example, in representative democracy, rulers can remain in power through the end of their term unless there is a legitimate way to dismiss them. Thus, even in democracy, there can be a disparity between the state’s policy and the people’s conscience.

Rom 13 does not guarantee the rightness of the state’s policy. Surely Rom 13:3 says that “rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong.” And Rom 13:4 says that a ruler is “God’s servant to do you good” and “an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.” But those passages are not describing government as it is, while, as Moo suggests, they may be “describing government as it *should* be.”<sup>34</sup> The fact that God has established the authorities does not guarantee that they always follow God’s teachings. Stott is right in that the state’s policy can contradict God’s teachings. There are many such examples in history. For instance, Stalin’s Russia and Pol Pot’s Cambodia, which conducted genocide, clearly violated God’s teachings.

Thus, one cannot morally justify every policy of the state on the ground that God has established the authority. If such justification is possible, the tyrannical policies of the states just mentioned become morally right because God established the authorities too. As we saw, “there is no authority except that which God has established” (Rom 13:1). While it is easy to show that the state’s policy can contradict God’s teachings, it seems impossible to prove that some authority was not established by God.

The answers we have seen also hold that Rom 13 does not guarantee the rightness of the state’s policy. Those answers assume that what is morally wrong for the state to order is morally wrong for the people to follow. Seemingly those answers do not distinguish between the ethical standards for the state and those for the people.

However, there can be cases where a state’s policy is morally wrong while the people’s submission to it is morally right. For example, a state orders something for an evil purpose, and the people obey it conscientiously without knowing the purpose. This can happen, since the people do not or cannot always know the state’s true intents. If the ethical standards for the people are identical with those for the state, those people

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<sup>33</sup>Nürnbergger, “Justice and Force,” 112.

<sup>34</sup>Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* 809.

are to blame. This seems unreasonable, especially considering that Rom 13 demands the people's submission to the state. It is unclear whether the answers we have seen protect those people. I distinguish between the ethical standards for the state and those for the people. The dual ethics protects conscientious people from moral blame for having obeyed the authority.

The dual ethics makes it impossible to appeal to Rom 13 to justify tyranny. Those who appeal to Rom 13 to justify any policy of the state conflate the ethical standards for the state and those for the people. They assume that what is morally right for the people to follow is morally right for the state to order. The dual ethics separates the morality of the state's policy from the people's duty to submit to the policy. Thus, the dual ethics makes it impossible to appeal to Rom 13 to justify tyranny.

The dual ethics is compatible with the various answers we have seen. According to Rom 13, the people's submission to the state is morally right. I make this valid unless their conscience objects. When their conscience objects, most of the answers can give them various rationales for disobeying.

Some New Testament passages support the dual ethics. War seems incompatible with the Christian teaching of love. But Jesus allows or tolerates the vocations of centurion and soldier in the following passage:

When Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, asking for help. "Lord," he said, "my servant lies at home paralyzed and in terrible suffering." Jesus said to him, "I will go and heal him." The centurion replied, "Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and that one, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it." When Jesus heard this, he was astonished and said to those following him, "I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." Then Jesus said to the centurion, "Go! It will be done just as you believed it would." And his servant was healed at that very hour (Matt 8:5-13; cf. Luke 7:1-10).

Jesus praised the soldiers, and did not tell the centurion and soldiers to leave their profession of arms. Similarly, Roman soldiers asked John the

Baptist what God expected of them: “some soldiers asked him [John], ‘And what should we do?’ He replied, ‘Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely—be content with your pay’” (Luke 3:14). John did not tell them to leave their posts or abandon their arms. These passages show that Jesus and John did not reproach the centurion and soldiers for their profession. But the passages do not refer to nor guarantee the rightness of the state’s policy. From the fact that Jesus praised the soldiers, it does not follow that the state’s policy is morally right. Soldiers are in a position where they have to obey the authority. Rom 13 suggests that their submission to the authority is morally right. Yet the rightness of the authority is a different issue. Since soldiers have a stricter duty to obey the authority than the common people, the dual ethics is more visible in the former. Still, the dual ethics exists in the latter too.

## **5. Conclusion**

Seemingly Rom 13 demands the people’s unconditional submission to the state. Scholars have provided various answers to the problem which arises when the state’s policy contradicts God’s teachings. Those answers assume that what is morally wrong for the state to order is morally wrong for the people to follow. However, there can be cases where a state’s policy is morally wrong while the people’s submission to it is morally right. I distinguished between the ethical standards for the state and those for the people. The dual ethics protects conscientious people from moral blame for having obeyed the authority. The dual ethics makes it impossible to appeal to Rom 13 to justify tyranny. The dual ethics is also compatible with the various answers. Some New Testament passages support the dual ethics.