

The Christian Citizen

Romans 13:1-7

INTRODUCTION

In Romans 12 the theme was Christian service. In chapter 13 the theme is Christian citizenship in the world. We are called out of this world but we still retain responsibilities in this world. The Church is not interested in party politics but the individual Christian can certainly use their God-given gifts and privileges as citizens to see that the best leaders are elected who will enact the best laws so that we can exercise our God-given freedoms in Christ. There are examples of godly men and women that God used in governmental influences to His glory. We think of Joseph and Nehemiah and Daniel and Esther.

Paul has written about the believer's relationships in love and now he writes about our relationships in law. In the chapter 13 Paul appeals to four motives; we are subject to the government for wrath's sake (vv.1-4); for conscience's sake (vv.5-7); and for love's sake (vv.8-10).

Christians Are Subject To Civil Authorities (v.1a)

Romans 13:1-7 (NKJV) 1a Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities.

Who are 'the governing authorities'? In the broadest sense it is 'the powers that be'. In more specific sense it means governments. Governments exist by permission of God. The civil governments have been established either directly or indirectly by God.

Paul writes "Let every soul be subject"—but this is a word that is often lost to the contemporary Christian. There is a difference between the word 'obey' and 'be subject'. The word subject means 'submit'. We submit ourselves to the governmental authority; and our refusal to submit constitutes resisting the ordinance of God.

Freedom loving Americans say; "What if they ask me to do something that is absolutely against my deeply held convictions or conscience or against the Scriptures? What if the government asks me to do something immoral or contradicts the commands of Christ?"

The Scriptures say you must be subject to them. What does that mean? Clearly the Apostles in the book of Acts were warned against teaching or preaching about Jesus. They were ordered not to preach Christ. What did the Apostles do? They continued to preach Christ but submitted themselves to beating, to imprisonment and sometimes to death.

Paul himself was subject to civil authorities. Paul was brought to various rulers (Agrippa and the High Priest; perhaps even to Nero).

We would like to believe that Paul is here writing of good government; benign government; healthy government. Paul will later argue that government exists to do good and restrain evil. But what of a government that does evil and restrains that which is good?

Paul reminds the Romans that government is appointed by God.

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What is the origin of government? It first appears in human history in Genesis 9:6; “whoever sheds man’s blood, by man his blood shall be shed.” The ability to discern justice and exercise justice launched human government by God. The highest function of government is the judicial taking of life—the one thing emphasized by divine decree. Like everything else entrusted to human beings, it did not take long for human government under God to become human government under fallen human tyranny. Government proved to be a heady wine for a fallen race. “The story of the tower of Babel shows how man used his new-found authority to plan organized rebellion against the very throne of God itself. Up until this time rebellion had been on an individual basis, now it became federated. The world’s first ‘united nations’ with headquarters in Babylon symbolizes the last one. Genesis 11 and 12 foreshadow Revelation 13, 17-18” (John Phillips p. 213).

The book of Daniel reminds us that God ordains the rise and fall of human governments (Daniel 4:17).

What if the government is bad, corrupt, illegitimate, communist, repressive, corrupt, evil, maniacal, totalitarian, extremely liberal or extremely conservative? What if the government seems godless, Christless, hopeless, useless?

The institution of marriage does not cease to exist simply because abusive marriages exist. The institution of government does not cease to exist simply because abusive governments exist. The institution of the church does not cease to exist simply because abusive churches exist.

The Scripture does not seem to suggest or allow exceptions on whether the government is appointed or elected; whether just or unjust, legitimate or illegitimate. We are subject.

Like all Scripture we must read both the text and the context. We cannot rip these words out of context or ignore the rest of the Scripture.

In Matthew 22:17-21 (NKJV) 17 Tell us, therefore, what do you think? Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?” 18 But Jesus perceived their wickedness, and said, “Why do you test Me, you hypocrites? 19 Show Me the tax money.” So they brought Him a denarius. 20 And He said to them, “Whose image and inscription is this?” 21 They said to Him, “Caesar’s.” And He said to them, “Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

Human government exists by authority of God. Paul tells us that governments are appointed by God. What do we do if the laws of the civil government conflict with the explicit commandments of God? Acts 5:29 (NKJV) “But Peter and the other apostles answered and said: “We ought to obey God, rather than men.”

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When an earthly ruler claims the rights and allegiances owed only to God, we are to obey God rather than men. Only God can be worshipped. The Christian believer is to say 'yes' to all civil laws that do not conflict with the clear, biblical commands of the Lord.

Government is appointed by God and approved by God.

Christians Consider The Source Of Government (vv.1b-2)

1b For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God.

2Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves.

Paul believed God appointed and approved government. Why obey the government? Paul argues that God established human government for human good. God allows the existence of human government. God allows positions, offices, contracts, constitutions; it is God's will that human governments exist and that people have the authority to rule within the state or society.

God has ordained that the family exists as the means by which family members relate to one another and share with one another. God ordained that parents rule in their homes not children. God ordained that the church exists; and that church leaders exercise authority in the church. God ordains that governments exist as the means by which citizens relate to one another; and that government officials exercise authority within the state.

In family, in church, in government, there are excellent leaders and there are poor leaders. There are leaders who exercise their roles with great care and there are those who horribly abuse their positions of responsibility.

There are people who are faithful and do an excellent job and unfaithful and do a reprehensible job. The fact that their are abusive husbands does not negate the family, or abusive pastors, the church, or abusive government leaders, the state or government. Government is ordained by God and government leaders are subject to God, accountable to God, responsible to God.

Paul couldn't be more clear. Disobedience to governmental authority is disobedience to God and will be judged. It is easy to get side-tracked on issues of good and evil rulers; and good and evil government. However the thrust of the passage is about Christians and their responsible relationship to government. Christians in many cultures and societies have little say or no voice in human governments. We are the marvelous exception! We have the wonderful opportunity to have a voice in political processes.

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Paul argues resisting authority is resisting God; since God established the authority. The expression “and those who resist will bring judgment (damnation) on themselves”. The Greek word is *krima*.

Christianity must not be confused with government, or political ideology, or political party, or political movement. This may come as a shock to you; but Jesus is not a Republican.

But that does not mean that our view on Government or political philosophy is somehow disconnected from a Biblical Worldview.

We Christians are not to be identified with murderers, with terror, with insurrection, with rebellion, with disobedience to just laws. Does that mean we are free to disobey unjust laws? We are free to disobey unjust laws—and we are free to embrace whatever consequences the government demands.

There is one exception to resisting the government allowed by God to the believer. When governments or rulers exercise personal and immoral mastery over human life, when the ruler or government orders you disobey the Lord, to disobey God’s commands in the Scripture, you are free to resist. The believer is always free to obey God rather than man. The believer must always pursue righteousness, biblical morality and biblical justice. “He has shown you, O man, what is good and what the Lord requires of you. But to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God”.

You must make sure that the moral issue, or the Biblical command is in fact what the Bible says, and not some man made issue. One example is found in Acts 4-5; the authorities arrested some of the disciples for teaching and preaching Jesus Christ has risen from the dead. The disciples called on people to repent of their sin and believe the gospel. The religious leaders (authorities) ordered the disciples to stop preaching. “We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name. . .yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man’s blood.” Peter and the other apostles told them, “We must obey God rather than men!” (Acts 5:28).

Yes the commands of God take precedence—supercede—override the commands of men. Those who have followed in the apostles’ footsteps have often paid a terrible price for obedience to Jesus Christ. Governments have tortured and tormented saints, imprisoned saints, burned our brothers, stoned our sisters, cut them up, and torn them to pieces.

Christians must resist when asked to perform immoral acts. Christians must not falsify documents, commit perjury, or lie to coverup crimes of superiors or subordinates. Christians must never think it is O.K; or permit the cover up of child molestation, or child sexual assault, or the brutal killing of the unborn. Christian it is never a good idea to violate your conscience in order to obey the government. This could mean anything from working in a government capacity to kill children or deploy nuclear weapons. Believers must not sin against their

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conscience. I am not a pacifist. But I respect the rights of individual Christians who are convinced that God has not given them the right to kill anyone, at anytime for any reason. Christians are called to obey their government. We are to be obedient citizens. We are called to profound obedience. We are also called to a profound obedience to Christ. This obedience should make us the best citizens. Our profound obedience leads us to obey the government—or disobey the government—when the government demands that we disobey God.

When can a Christian disobey the government? When the government compels us to violate a command of God. When the government asks us to commit an illegal act, or immoral act or unethical act. When the government insists we violate our conscience—and our conscience is informed by Scripture and submission to the Holy Spirit.

Christians Submit To The Purposes Of Government (vv.3-7)

3For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same.

4For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil.

The government is given by God to promote good and restrain evil and protect citizens.

Rulers are not ordained by God to promote evil and restrain good and harm citizens! Here Paul gives the fundamental principles of the purpose of government. The government is called God's servant or God's minister. I know that creeps some of you out. Remember the root and meaning of the word minister—*diakonos*—service. Imagine a word—that takes something forged with integrity and then dips in humility and you understand the true meaning of minister. Ministry—absent humility is not true Biblical ministry. Paul's point is evident—government either wittingly or unwittingly serves the purposes of God.

Can you imagine if our elected and unelected officials truly believed this? The force of the word indicates that government officials should serve with a sense of dignity and honor—coupled with humility and solemnity—knowing they are God's ministers—appointed to do good and restrain evil. “FOR GOOD”. Even bad governments do some good. A communist government is better than no government (though some would gladly argue against my point). I am contrasting government against chaos! The darkest time in ancient Israel was the time of the Judges; where everyone did what was right in their own eyes. If government were taken away from the earth—and complete lawlessness and chaos emerged—it would be an ugly sight. In one sense the government (or absence of government) in Somalia is a good example.

the state is given the ability to exercise justice, administer punishment to lawbreakers and criminals. The state is given the responsibility of judicial vengeance—not given to individual Christians. The state renders evil for evil (12:7); which the individual must never do. God's way

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of dealing with evil is not by personal vengeance—but justice administered by the state. The state gives us a kind of preview of God’s judicial wrath and punishment—by a sovereign and perfect Lord. When the state is faithful to its God-given function it does “good” to us (4a). The state does not bear the sword for nothing—even when the state bears the sword imperfectly.

5Therefore you must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience’ sake.

This describes the depth of obedience the Christian is called to—to the government—both for sake of punishment and for sake of conscience. We are not simply afraid of getting caught if we disobey—we understand God allows government for good. God instituted government and rulers and they are either knowing or unknowing—witting or unwitting—agents of God. The same could be said of parents and church leaders. Christians are to see the big picture with an informed consciences—living in profound subjection to God—by the power of the Holy Spirit—in submission to the Lord Jesus Christ.

How does this all work in the real world?

6For because of this you also pay taxes, for they are God’s ministers attending continually to this very thing.

Christians pay your taxes. Pay what is legally your responsibility to pay. Pay what you owe. No more. Or no less. What if the taxes are outrageous? What if our taxes are misspent? What about government waste? What about an ever expanding government which digs deeper and deeper into the citizens pocket? What if the taxes are used to outfit Roman soldiers and build Roman roads and forge Roman spears and swords used to cut and hack Roman citizens to pieces?

Ray Stedman writes; “You have a right, of course, as does everyone, to protest injustice and to correct abuse, but don’t be grumbling about the taxes that you have to pay. I have had to learn some lessons on this myself. The first time I had to pay an income tax was a few years ago. My income had been so low for a long time that I didn’t have to pay any taxes. But gradually it caught up and I finally had to pay. I remember how I resented it. In fact, when I sent my tax form I addressed it to “The Infernal Revenue Service”. They never answered, although they did accept the money. The next year I had improved my attitude a bit. I addressed it to “The eternal revenue service. But I have repented from all those sins, and now hope to pay my taxes cheerfully.”

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7Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor.

Tribute refers to land, property and income taxes; ‘custom to export and import duties;’ fear to reverence for authority; and honor to respect—for positions of authority, or to those of whatever rank.

The Roman government had a heavy tax system. But it might surprise you how much taxes people paid in the first century in the Roman Empire. There was an income tax—one percent of a man’s income. There was a ground tax (property tax) a man had to pay one-tenth or one one-fifth of the crops produced by the ground. He could make payment in coin or in actual crops harvested. There was a poll tax: paid by everyone between the ages of twelve or fourteen and sixty-five. It amounted to about a day’s wage (a denarius). There were also local taxes that had to be paid. There were import and export taxes; and there were custom duties including taxes for using main roads, crossing bridges, entering markets and harbors, transferring animals, and driving carts and wagons.

Conclusion

The government’s job is to make sure you live in safety and insure the financial stability of the country. This means safety in your community. This means resist the criminals in your neighborhood and reward the conscientious citizens. Paul tells the Romans the only ones who need fear the law—are the law breakers! The Bible warns that as the end times approach we will see increased lawlessness (Matt.24:12).

R. Kent Hughes writes; “Through Jesus Christ we can live out our duty as described in the Word of God. We can also fulfill our duty to disobey when it is the will of God to do so. When it became clear that the Nazis were pursuing their terrible racist policies, Pastor Martin Niemoller continued to preach the truth and as a result was thrown into prison. The prison chaplain upon visiting Niemoller asked somewhat foolishly, “What brings you here? Why are you in prison?” To which Niemoller replied angrily, “And, brother, why are you not in prison?”

Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and give to God what is God’s.”

“The problem isn’t how to keep religion out of politics but how to subject political life to spiritual criticism without losing sight of the tension between the political and spiritual realms because politics unavoidably rests on some measure of coercion. It can never become a perfect realm of love and justice, but neither can it be dismissed as the work of the Devil.”

—**Christoper Lasch in Tikkun; Christianity Today**