

Romans (82) **The Christian and the State**

We arrive in our study of Paul's Epistle to the Romans to chapter 13, in which we read of Paul's instruction for Christians to submit to the political authorities under which they live. Here we receive general instruction on how we should understand and relate to civil authorities. This is a very complex matter with many implications. It is not our intention at this time to articulate a full Christian theology on the role of the Christian in culture, or the larger matter of the involvement of the church to the state, or certainly not an explanation of the kingdom of God as it relates to the kingdoms of the world. But one cannot easily enter into a treatment of the subject of Romans 13:1-7 without at least touching on these matters. But further complicating the matter, we are living at a stage in history in which so much has transpired over the last 2,000 years regarding error respecting the relationship between the Christian, his church, and the state. This is a very complex matter, but it is a very important matter. And it is one in which there exists much difference of opinion and practice among sincere Christians.

Let us begin by reading **Romans 13:1-7**.

¹Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. ²Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. ³For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, ⁴for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. ⁵Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. ⁶For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. ⁷Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.

First, let us consider this paragraph within the context of this section of the epistle. It might appear at a casual reading that Romans 13:1-7 is quite a departure from the ethical section that we have just considered in Romans 12. But this is not the case. In Romans 12:1ff the apostle had instructed his readers that all of life was to be conformed to God's will. This would apply also to the sphere of the Christian's relationship with the governing authorities. Believers are to show forth their spiritual worship in the way that they relate to rulers and laws of the government under which they live. But further, Paul had exhorted Christians in 12:19 not to avenge themselves, but wait patiently for God's final judgment upon the wicked. But that it not to say that evil people escape consequences in this life, for God has appointed civil authorities to execute justice. This enables a civil society to exist with relative peace and security. And so, how the Christian lives under civil authority is an important aspect of the Christian life and how the Christian may testify of his faith in a fallen world.

The first word (13:1) is the general principle that should govern the attitude and behavior of the Christian toward the secular authorities. The Christian is to be observant of the laws of the government authorities under which he lives. ***"Let every person be subject to the governing authorities."*** (Rom. 13:1). By every person, we understand Paul writing of every Christian person. It is true that all people everywhere should follow this precept, but Paul is writing to Christians specifically, who are to live according to their Christian faith. To be subject means to be law-abiding, subject to the civil authorities as legitimate law-makers, submitting to the laws that they impose upon the citizens of their realm.

Paul reasons that authorities should be obeyed, ***"For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God"*** (Rom 13:1). Paul mentioned "authorities", which is plural, in verse

1a. Here in verse 1b he speaks of each and every person who is a civil authority, for it is a singular word. Every person in civil government is ordained by God and the Christian is to live in obedience to the laws that are passed and imposed by those civil authorities. They are “instituted” by God. God has decreed in His purposes in history to appoint them to their responsible role within society.

This is not a statement that all governments are “good” or that all civil authorities are faithful in the exercise of their authority. There are many examples in Scripture of governments and civil authorities who were evil and unjust in their actions. Nevertheless, God has appointed each one, even all of them to their office and their service. God accomplishes His purposes in history using governing authorities to execute His will.

Verse 2 states that to resist the authorities is to resist God who ordained those authorities. **“Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.”** When it says that the lawbreaker will incur judgment, it is probably not a reference to God’s final judgment; rather, the lawbreaker will incur the judgment of the civil authorities whom he is defying. “It is possible that the “judgment” refers to God’s eschatological judgment (i.e. end time judgment), but the structure of the text suggests that the judgment is inflicted by the rulers and authorities.”¹

Verse 3 gives the reason for which God ordained them. **“For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad.”** Political rulers are to be a terror to bad conduct upon the part of those who live under their rule. Here we read on one of the chief functions of legitimate government. God has appointed civil authorities to pass laws and enforce those laws, bringing punishment upon lawbreakers. God has appointed civil authority to protect its citizens and to punish them who would afflict its citizens. This is not saying that all civil authorities are faithful in fulfilling this calling of God, but this is the end to which God appointed them. Because of sin civil leaders can be corrupt. They can and do pass unrighteous laws that are contrary to God’s will. Elsewhere we can read of the responsibility and accountability that civil authorities have before God to fulfill the true purpose of God for which they were called. But here, it is the Christian’s responsibility of submission and obedience to civil laws that is in view.

We read an appealed reason to obey in **verses 3b-4**: **“Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God’s servant for your good.”** God would have us live in peace and harmony with our civil authorities. God has ordained them as His servants to serve us with their authority. By the way, here we also see that not only are civil authorities to punish evil, they are to recognize and appreciate people who live in accordance to the laws they pass.

On the other hand, if you choose to break the laws that these civil authorities have made for society, then you are subject to the retributive punishment of those authorities. **Verse 4b** reads, **“But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain.”** The reference here to “the sword” speaks of the civil government’s authority to enforce its laws up to and including executing lawbreakers. The “sword” was the implement of law enforcement with the threat of taking the life of the one against it is wielded. Clearly the Word of God gives authority to civil government to execute capital punishment. It dates back to the days of Noah after the flood. God told Noah:

⁵And for your lifeblood I will require a reckoning: from every beast I will require it and from man. From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man. ⁶Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image.” (Gen. 9:5, 6)

Because God made man in the image of God, to strike and slay a human being is a great crime that can be punished justly by the forfeiture of the murderer’s life. This is the statute that God made with all mankind after the flood. He entrusted the civil authorities to execute this sentence if the crime warranted it.

Verse 4b declares the civil authority as God’s servant. **“For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer.”** You and I are not to avenge ourselves. But God has appointed an avenger for us, which is the civil government. God is executing His wrath upon sin in history through the civil authorities that He has appointed over us.

¹ Thomas Schreiner, *Romans*, (Baker Academic, 1998), p. 683.

Therefore we ought to be law keepers, submitting ourselves to the authorities, obeying the laws that they have passed and enforce upon our society. But because God has appointed these authorities, we should be obedient to them, as we read in **verse 5**, ***“Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God’s wrath but also for the sake of conscience.”*** When we are aware that God has ordained our civil authorities and the passing and enforcement of laws is due to the foreordination of God, we should be motivated to obey them. This motivation is for two reasons. First, we should be in subjection to them so that we avoid God’s wrath that will be administered by them toward us if we fail or refuse to obey them. Second, we should obey them because of our conscience. We know that they are ordained of God and that if we resist them we resist God, and our Christian conscience would not want that, so we strive to be law keepers.

Paul became practical in **verse 6**: ***“For because of this you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing.”*** It is the responsibility of citizens to pay taxes to the civil authorities for the service that they bring to society. Now perhaps Paul addressed directly this matter of paying taxes because of the inordinate taxes that Rome was imposing on its citizens during this time in history.

It is implied that it is fitting to pay taxes so that the authorities would have the resources to execute their responsibilities. **John Calvin** wrote about the responsibility of the authorities to use taxes in a just manner:

Yet it behooves them to remember, that whatever they receive from the people, is as it were public property, and not to be spent in the gratification of private indulgence. For we see the use for which Paul appoints these tributes which are to be paid—even that kings may be furnished with means to defend their subjects.²

Of course our Lord also taught that it was a lawful thing to do, to pay taxes to whom taxes are due. Our Lord

¹⁵Then the Pharisees went and plotted how to entangle him in his words. ¹⁶And they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, “Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone’s opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances. ¹⁷Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?”

¹⁸But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? ¹⁹Show me the coin for the tax.”

And they brought him a denarius.

²⁰And Jesus said to them, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?”

²¹They said, “Caesar’s.”

Then he said to them, “Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” ²²When they heard it, they marveled. And they left him and went away. (Matt. 22:15-22).

We next read in **verse 7**, ***“Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed.”*** The Christian is to regard and respect those in authority because God has ordained them and commissioned them to fulfil a vital role in society. In order to pay honor to whom honor is owed, it should be understood as the responsibility to render honor to the man in office because of the office, even if he himself is not an honorable man. His position warrants honor even when his person would seem to warrant otherwise.

Now, what we have set before us in Romans 13:1-7 and how we are to relate and respond to those in governmental authority over us should not be understood as exhaustive on the matter. We have general principles set forth before us. And these are generally true in whatever kind of society or political system the

² *Calvin’s Commentaries*, vol. 19 (Baker, 1993), p. 483.

Christian may find himself. But there are other matters to take into consideration also. This is not to be understood to be the complete word on the subject of the Christian and the state.

The text is misunderstood if it is taken out of context and used as an absolute word so that Christians uncritically comply with the state no matter what is being demanded. What we have here is a general exhortation that delineates what is usually the case: people should normally obey ruling authorities. The text is not intended as a full-blown treatise on the relationship of believers to the state. It is a general exhortation setting forth the typical obligations one has to civil authorities. Indeed, Paul envisions a situation in which the governing authority carries out its task by punishing evildoers and rewarding those who do what is good. I am not persuaded that one can account for this passage by appealing to Paul's good relationship with civil authorities or the more genial part of Nero's reign. Paul was keenly aware that the ruling authorities had put Jesus to death, and as a student of the OT and Jewish tradition he was well-schooled in the evil that governments had inflicted on the people of God. It was simply not his intention to detail here the full relationship of believers to their government. Stein (1989:334) says rightly, "Governments, even oppressive governments, by their very nature seek to prevent the evils of indiscriminate murder, riot, thievery, as well as general instability and chaos, and good acts do at times meet its approval and praise." Paul would not disagree with the call to obey God rather than rulers when they attempted to squelch the preaching of the gospel (Acts 5:29; cf. Martyrdom of Polycarp 10:1-2, where rulers are respected but Polycarp will not render worship to the genius of Caesar). Nor would he dispute the claim that the state can function as an evil beast (Rev. 13), since John's teaching stems from Daniel 7, and Paul himself expects an evil ruler to arise (2 Thess. 2:1-12). The intention in Romans is to sketch in the normal and usual relationship between believers and ruling power (cf. Titus 3:1; 1 Pet. 2:13-17). Christians should submit to such authority and carry out its statutes, unless the state commands believers to do that which is contrary to the will of God.³

And so, even as we recognize and acknowledge a legitimate role for civil laws and for the authorities that make them, wholesale devotion, commitment, or loyalty to a government may not be possible for the Christian. We have many examples and illustrations of the people of God defying government authority when what government commanded to do what God has commanded not to do. Here are a few examples.

First, we read of the Israelite midwives refusing to submit to Egypt's Pharaoh when he told them to kill all the male children. This is recorded in Exodus 1:15ff.

¹⁵Then the king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives, of whom the name of one was Shiphrah and the name of the other Puah; ¹⁶and he said, "When you do the duties of a midwife for the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstools, if it is a son, then you shall kill him; but if it is a daughter, then she shall live." ¹⁷But the midwives feared God, and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but saved the male children alive. ¹⁸So the king of Egypt called for the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this thing, and saved the male children alive?" ¹⁹And the midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are lively and give birth before the midwives come to them." ²⁰Therefore God dealt well with the midwives, and the people multiplied and grew very mighty. ²¹And so it was, because the midwives feared God, that He provided households for them. (Exo. 1:15-21)

A second example is when the apostles Peter and John refused to stop preaching although the civil and religious leaders of Jerusalem commanded them not to preach Jesus. They did not submit to their authorities in this thing. Peter and John had been preaching in the temple. We read of the content of their preaching in Acts 4:12, which reads, "Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." What was the response of the authorities? We read in verses 13ff.

³ Schreiner, *Romans*, pp. 687f.

¹³Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated and untrained men, they marveled. And they realized that they had been with Jesus. ¹⁴And seeing the man who had been healed standing with them, they could say nothing against it. ¹⁵But when they had commanded them to go aside out of the council, they conferred among themselves, ¹⁶saying, “What shall we do to these men? For, indeed, that a notable miracle has been done through them is evident to all who dwell in Jerusalem, and we cannot deny it. ¹⁷But so that it spreads no further among the people, ***let us severely threaten them, that from now on they speak to no man in this name.***” ¹⁸***And they called them and commanded them not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus.*** ¹⁹But Peter and John answered and said to them, “***Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge.***” ²⁰For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard.” ²¹So when they had further threatened them, they let them go, finding no way of punishing them, because of the people, since they all glorified God for what had been done. (Acts 4:13-21)

Peter continued to preach the gospel in defiance of the authorities. He did not submit to this “ordinance” of God. And certainly it was the right thing for him to do, not to submit to this command of those authorities, but rather to do the will of God and be willing to suffer for it. And yet it was Peter who wrote this instruction in his first epistle:

¹³Therefore submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake, whether to the king as supreme, ¹⁴or to governors, as to those who are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and *for the* praise of those who do good. ¹⁵For this is the will of God, that by doing good you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men-- ¹⁶as free, yet not using liberty as a cloak for vice, but as bondservants of God. (1 Pet 2:13-16)

A third example may be cited from history that began toward the end of the first century. Rome required all people in its realm to worship the Roman emperor as god, Christians refused to submit to this. Many forfeited privilege and stature, goods and homes, and multitudes forfeited their lives because they refused to submit this human ordinance.

And so, when we proclaim the message that we are to submit to civil authorities and obey all of their laws, we are speaking in general terms. We recognize that there are areas of authority that belong to political authorities. There were some who had sought to find fault with Jesus. They developed a challenge that they thought would discredit Jesus either before the people or before the Roman authorities. We read this account earlier, but let us look at it again from another perspective.

Then the Pharisees went and plotted how they might entangle Him in His talk. ¹⁶And they sent to Him their disciples with the Herodians, saying, “Teacher, we know that You are true, and teach the way of God in truth; nor do You care about anyone, for You do not regard the person of men. ¹⁷Tell us, therefore, what do you think? Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?”

¹⁸But 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.

²⁰And He said to them, “Whose image and inscription is this?”

²¹They 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.” ²²When they had heard these words, they marveled, and left Him and went their way. (Matt. 22:15-22)

When our Lord taught this truth, “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesars and unto God the things that are God’s”, He was not asserting that a king has equal authority as God, that Caesar has his realm but God has His realm. As Christians we recognize that “Caesar” is subject to God. The authority that he has was given to him by God. God had given him certain, specific responsibilities, therefore, “We are to render unto Caesar ***the things that are Caesars***”, and we would argue, only those things that are Caesar’s, for

we are to render unto God the things that are God's. The governing authority has a responsibility before God to govern justly and rightly but only within the matters that God had appointed him. All other claims to authority are not "the things that are Caesar's" to control.

We are to remind the governing authority of his obligation before God to do what is right. This is what our Lord did before the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate:

¹⁰Then Pilate said to Him, "Are You not speaking to me? Do You not know that I have power to crucify You, and power to release You?" ¹¹Jesus answered, "You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from above. Therefore the one who delivered Me to you has the greater sin."

¹²From then on Pilate sought to release Him (John 19:10-12)

Now it is important for us to remember that we Americans stand in a rather unique place in history and live in a rather unique land, politically speaking. As Christians in the United States of America, we have a relationship with the state that is quite unusual and unique in the world in which we live. People in other nations and cultures do not commonly understand this about our nation. We do not have a king, a ruling monarch, as other nations. Our government by definition is "of the people, by the people, for the people."⁴ Here are the words of **Donald Carson** in a book that he wrote that touches on this matter:

Most who read these pages live in democracies. Compared with Christians of the first century under the Roman Empire, this reality brings new freedoms and new responsibilities. On the side of freedom, it is difficult to imagine a Christian in Judea in about A.D. 65 singing, "And I am proud to be a Judean man/For at least I know I'm free." Yet on the other hand, the biblical injunctions to submit to the state as to God means, in our context, that we *must* take our obligations toward a *participatory* democracy seriously. This combined with the moral obligation to "do good to the city," involves believers in matters of government at *some* level) (all the way from voting to influencing government to legislating and governing) in ways impossible for Paul or Luke—and this means that today it is more difficult to develop a "them" versus "us" mentality typical of believers under totalitarian regimes. While that may improve our sense of participation, doubtless it also increases the possibility of being snookered into confusing the kingdom of god with our own government or party.⁵

Here in America we have a constitution that is the law of the land. It is on the basis of this contract Americans have agreed to function as a nation. The people are the rulers, so to speak. As a republic we select men and women to represent us, but when we do, we grant them the authority to govern us according to the constitution. It is for that purpose we elected them. It is their responsibility to perform that duty to which we appointed them. We declare to them in effect, "Here is our constitution. It identifies and defines who we are and how our government is to function. We have elected you to govern us according to this rule." When our governing authorities assumed their office, we elicited a commitment from them. They swore an oath to us that they would govern us according to this law of the land, the constitution. The requirement of this oath is itself in our constitution. Here is how Article II, section 1 of the constitution reads regarding the presidential oath of office:

Before he enter on the execution of his office, he shall take the following oath or affirmation: "I do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will faithfully execute the office of President of the United States, and will to the best of my ability, preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States."

The people, the government, have limited the authority and have stipulated in what arena of authority he may govern us. The constitution, as amended and interpreted by our courts, is the law of the land. It would seem to me that before God we have a responsibility to submit to every ordinance within the arena to which he was appointed and to which he agreed when voted into office. And I only single the president out

⁴ From Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address.

⁵ Donald Carson, *Christ & Culture Revisited* (Eerdmans, 2008), p.196.

because he is the chief executive. But this responsibility and authority to uphold and govern us by the constitution is at every level of government and applies to every government official. It would seem to me that this allows for dissent and non-conformity to laws imposed and actions taken by our government leaders that are in conflict with the constitution to which they agreed to uphold and was the one condition we placed upon them when we conferred political authority upon them.

Our **Declaration of Independence**, which was the official beginning point of our nation, advocated the citizens' right and responsibility to overthrow a government when it ceased to fulfill its responsibility as a just government. Here are some of its words:

When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.--That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, --That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shewn, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security.--Such has been the patient sufferance of these Colonies; and such is now the necessity which constrains them to alter their former Systems of Government. The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States.

There is included at this point a long list of specific grievances and abuses of power of the King of England over the colonies. The Declaration continued:

In every stage of these Oppressions We have Petitioned for Redress in the most humble terms: Our repeated Petitions have been answered only by repeated injury. A Prince whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a Tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of a free people...

We, therefore, the Representatives of the united States of America, in General Congress, Assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do, in the Name, and by Authority of the good People of these Colonies, solemnly publish and declare, That these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States; that they are Absolved from all Allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain, is and ought to be totally dissolved; and that as Free and Independent States, they have full Power to levy War, conclude Peace, contract Alliances, establish Commerce, and to do all other Acts and Things which Independent States may of right do. And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.

Now please do not misunderstand me. We are not advocating insurrection or rebellion. What we are saying is that the nature of our government and the limitation and stipulations that we have placed upon our leaders in the specific ways that we permit them to lead us, sets parameters for us that governs our conscience before God. We are under no obligation to obey laws that they have imposed that are in

contradiction or are beyond the arena of rule that we have granted them. The authority they claim or exercise that reaches beyond the parameters of the constitution is illegitimate.

With privilege comes responsibility. We are not to be a people who withdraws from interest and involvement in the political process. But as citizens we have the privilege, and as Christians we have the responsibility to inform others and vote according to our Christian convictions. And we do so not in a spirit of rebellion against legitimate authority, for our desire is to submit to all such authority. It is illegitimate authority that expects and demands submission that calls for our response, “We ought to obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29).