

Romans 13 and Civil Disobedience

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Romans 13 deals with the Christian and his relationship to the state. The word “state” means the whole political organization (including its legislatures, its courts, its bureaus, and all that goes with it). It’s a synonym for the word “government” and for the word “Caesar.”

The Christian is really a citizen of heaven, and yet at the same time, this does not give him license to disobey and ignore human governments here on the earth. We are responsible to submit to the laws of the country in which we happen to live. Peter says, in **1 Peter 2:13**, “Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake, whether it be to the king, as supreme, or unto governors.” Paul instructed Titus to “Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient.” Timothy was instructed to pray for kings and for those in places of authority.

Most of us (either by natural birth or by naturalization) are citizens of the United States of America, and yet at the same time, those who have been born again are members of the kingdom of heaven. And the Christian has an obligation to both; that is, he has a responsibility toward human government, as well as toward the King of kings. Jesus said it this way: “Render therefore unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and unto God the things that are God’s.”

God has two distinctly differing institutions through which He works and governs in this world – the Church, and the state. The primary responsibility of the Church is to minister to the spiritual needs of men, and the primary responsibility of the state is to maintain law and order in a society that largely ignores God. The Church must never try and dominate the state, and neither should the state interfere with the Church. There should be a separation between church and state. The use of the first-person pronouns in **Romans 12** and the use of the third person pronouns in **Romans 13**, give a clear indication of the separateness of the two kingdoms. History reveals that in the past, all attempts to try and combine the functions of the Church and the state (and this has

often been done), have always led to serious confusion. Wherever the lines of separation between Church and state have been kept the most clear, the Church's testimony has remained the strongest.

The New Testament says nothing about how the affairs of the state should be conducted. We don't try and tell the government how to conduct its affairs, how much tax to levy, and this sort of thing. We let these decisions in the hands of the government leaders. The Church has a much higher calling than to get involved in controversies about wages and taxes and immigration laws. Paul had an excellent opportunity to tell Felix how to run the affairs of the state, but Paul spoke about sin, and righteousness, and judgment to come. But while the New Testament says nothing about how the affairs of the state should be conducted, it does say something about our responsibilities toward the state, as a citizen. We want to examine carefully God's Word as it is given in **Romans 13:1-7**.

Romans 13:1-2

“Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. for there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God; and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation. For rulers.., “

It is the will of God that nations should be ruled or governed. And we are to submit to these rulers because God ordained government for man's good. Civil authorities are “servants” of God (**verse 4**), or “agents” of God (N.E.B.); not necessarily “sons” of God, but “servants” that perform God-appointed duties. Without any government at all, depraved society would become lawless and anarchy would result. Our neighborhoods, instead of being quiet and peaceful, would be filled with violence and terror.

Paul is not discussing any particular *kind* of government here, he is just discussing the necessity for government itself. He says that rulers are necessary. I would rather live in Russia (even under ruthless leaders), than to live in a country where there is no government, no recognized authority at all. And remember that nations and empires and kings, rise and fall at the command of *God*. Pilate said to Jesus one day, “Knowest thou not that I have power to crucify thee?” Jesus answered, “You could have no power at all against me, except it were given thee from above.” Where did Pilate get his power! He got it from above. And since governmental authority is ordained of God, we must be subject to it.

Anyone who resists the authority of human governments, *is actually rebelling against God* (because God ordains that authority), and **verse 2** says, “he shall receive

damnation,” that is, he will come under the judgment of God. The New Testament (with very few exceptions) *condemns* civil disobedience and rebellion against human government. By way of contrast, one who *respects* those in authority (whether it is a corner policeman or the President of the nation), *is really paying respect to God*. There is absolutely nothing unscriptural about simple patriotism and good citizenship.

Romans 13:3-4

“For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou, then, not be afraid of the power? Do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same; for he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain; for he is the minister of God, an avenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil”

The state is an agency that God has set up for maintaining law and order. The government is a God-appointed institution. It’s designed for the benefit of man.

Verse 4 says “**he is a minister of God to thee for good.**” Civil authorities protect our rights and guard our liberties. They protected Paul one time when forty Jews made a pledge that they would neither eat nor drink until they had slain him. The policeman giving a ticket to a speeding motorist, is an agent of God for good. He is ordained of God to keep the motorist from killing others, and from endangering his own life. “**But**” Paul continues in **verse 4**, while civil authorities are God’s servants for good, if we practice doing wrong, we have reason to dread them. The ruler is not only an agent of God to encourage well-doing, he is also an avenger, to execute wrath upon them that do evil.

If you are driving down the highway (and you’re within the limit of speed), and a policeman drives up behind you, it doesn’t frighten you at all. But if you are driving down the highway (and you’re going over the speed limit), and a policeman drives up behind you, he becomes, a terror. And he ought to! God has ordained that men in authority shall not only encourage the good, but shall also punish the evil. Some proclaim loudly that the state has no right to execute vengeance, to punish evil, and to use capital punishment. But **Romans 13** says, “**He beareth not the sword in vain, for he is the minister of God, an avenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil.**” The state is charged with the responsibility of punishing evil. If there had been no civil authority, only anarchy and chaos would result, because of the natural man’s bent toward evil and his tendency to do wrong.

Romans 13:5-6

“Wherefore, ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath but also for conscience sake. For, for this cause pay ye tribute also; for they are God’s ministers, attending continually upon this very thing.”

We are to be subject to governmental authority not only for “wrath” (not only because civil rulers punish those who are disobedient), but also for “conscience sake” (because when obeying the laws of the state, we are really obeying God). If we want a good conscience before God, we must submit to the laws of the state. In other words, we are not to obey the laws of the land just to keep out of jail (because we are afraid of being punished), but we are to obey them *because obedience is right* and it is in accordance with the will of God for us. This means that if we live in town, we keep the snow off the sidewalks; if we drive on the highway, we stay within the limit of speed; and verse 6 says that if a new tax is levied, we are to pay it.

The Christian should be the most law-abiding citizen that can be found anywhere in his community. *The only time he declines to obey* the authorities, is if they command him to do something expressly forbidden in the Scriptures – and even then, *he must decline in the spirit of humility, and not in the spirit of rebellion*. A Mennonite C. O. who was sentenced to hard labor during World War I, because he refused to carry a gun, says, “I could not obey the order to go into the army, without violating God’s higher law, but I did not disobey in a willful and obstinate manner; I declined as quietly and respectfully as possible.” There may be times when the demands of Caesar and the demands of God come into conflict, and then we must “obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29). The Book of Acts, for example, gives several illustrations of rulers attempting to prohibit the teaching of the Word of God (Acts 4:18-20). The apostles obeyed God rather than the rulers. Generally speaking, these times are very rare.

Romans 13:7

“Render, therefore, to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor.” Verse 7 concludes this section of our duties toward the government.”

“Tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom.” “Tribute” is a tax on property; “customs” are taxes on goods brought into the country. It is honorable and right and Christlike to pay taxes, to pay them promptly, and to do it without complaining. This is true whether it is the annual tax on property, or a custom levied on merchandise brought into the country. We would hardly care to live in a country

that doesn't provide institutions for the mentally insane, public education, highways upon which to drive, etc.- and therefore we should gladly help pay the cost of these things. True, some revenue might be used unwisely, and some politicians are crooked and dishonest – but most of us wouldn't care to trade one square inch of our homeland for one square mile of any other spot on earth.

“Fear to whom fear.” There must be respect and awe for those in power, because we know that the authority they wield, is given by God. *“Honor to whom honor.”* We must honor the man in office because of his position, not necessarily because we approve of his personal conduct or of his political activities. Nero was the Roman Emperor when Paul wrote some of his Epistles. Nero was the man who ripped open the body of his own mother, in order that he might see the womb that bore him. He was a wicked man who lived in luxury; he never wore the same garment twice; his horses were shed with silver; he fished with hooks of gold. He was the man who ordered the city of Rome to be burned, and then blamed it on the Christians. And yet this is the man of whom Peter says, *“Honor the king.”* If under such an Emperor, Christians were called upon to be submissive and to give honor, then there is no place for rebellion under any government.

In conclusion then, the New Testament teaches that Christian people should be good citizens, loyal to the government (as long as its demands do not conflict with clear demands of God), and prompt in paying taxes. The Christian has a God-given responsibility to pray for those in authority, to willingly obey them, and to support causes that promote justice and equity.

There are only two times when the disciple of Jesus declines to obey human authorities:

- (1) If the government *forbids* him to do what the Bible plainly commands;
- (2) If the government *commands* him to do what the New Testament clearly forbids.

Note the following examples which illustrate each situation:

- (1) The Great Commission (**Matthew 28:19-20**) commands us to preach the Gospel to every person. If rulers *forbid* our doing what God clearly commands, we do it anyhow, like Peter and John did (**Acts 4:13-20**).
- (2) Jesus prohibits the taking of human life and teaches us to love our enemies (**Matthew 5:43-44**). If rulers *command* us to take human life, we refuse to do it, like the early church did for three centuries after the time of Christ

The prevailing atmosphere in the New Testament is one of respect for those persons in the places of civil authority. Very seldom does it happen in a nation which is a

republic that one is *required* to do what God's Word *clearly* forbids. If we must ever disobey human government, it should be done with a spirit of humility and not in a spirit of defiance.

Something to think about:

Since God is sovereign and His laws are immutable and because He has commanded that we obey civil authority (**Romans 13**) – to disobey civil authority is to disobey God's law. But what happens when obedience to civil law would be disobedience to God's law? Then we are to obey God rather than man. This, however, cannot be used as a salve for the conscience, because to disobey civil law (when in fact obedience clearly would not violate God's law), would become disobedience to God's law under **Romans 13**.

–adapted from a pamphlet by Emmett Lehman,
The Fraud of Civil Disobedience