

The Christian's Attitudes and Actions Toward Governing Authorities (*Part 1*)

Romans 13:1-7

Thought for the Day: As followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, it is our duty to be good citizens who are living in respectful submission to the governing authorities while maintaining a clear conscience before God.

As people who have been brought into right relationship with God through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, how should our relationship with the Lord affect our relationship with governing authorities? What does "loving your neighbor as you love yourself" look like when your neighbor works for the government? As Christians, what attitudes should we hold and what actions should we take toward our government? We are living in a day in which the spirit of lawlessness (2 Thessalonians 2:7), with the chaos and violence that comes with it, is sweeping over the earth. As the Day of the Lord approaches, we can expect an intensification of this spirit of lawlessness to take place. What, then, should be our attitudes and actions toward human government that was designed and intended by God to suppress this spirit?

1 Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities...

- Just as a soldier submits to and obeys the orders of his superior officer, so as Christian citizens, we are to submit to and obey the laws of our governing authorities. (1 Peter 2:13-17)
- When our Founding Fathers established our republic, they did not make the king the supreme authority; rather, they made the duly established laws of the land the supreme authority.
- "A primary element that has separated the United States of America from virtually every other nation in history is the concept of it being 'a nation of laws, not a nation of men.'
- 'A nation of laws' means that laws, not people, rule. Everyone is to be governed by the same laws, regardless of their station; whether it is the most common American or Members of Congress, high-ranking bureaucrats or the President of the United States; all must be held to the just laws of America. No one is, or can be allowed to be, above the law." (*James Shott*)

...for there is no authority except that which God has established.

- Human government is a divine institution established by God to govern the affairs of human society.
- Why is human government necessary? Because humankind is sinful and must have some kind of authority to restrict our sinful nature.
- Without human government, "Every man does that which is right in his own eyes." (Judg. 17:6; 21:25; Prov. 21:2) And that is the definition of anarchy!
- When governments collapse, the result is chaos, anarchy, destruction and death.
- Human government was established by God to promote law and order on earth and the overall good of the civil society.
- Because of Deuteronomy 17:14-15, Jewish Christians especially struggled to submit to the authority of Roman government.

The authorities that exist have been established by God.

- Daniel 4:17, 25 – One way God punishes a nation for turning its back on Him is by setting over them the “lowliest of men.” It is sad but true that a nation usually gets the leadership it deserves!

2 Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted...

- To rebel against the governing authority is to rebel against God Himself; to disobey the government is to disobey God.
- However, we must not use this verse as an excuse for blindly submitting to the dictates of a totalitarian government. It is hard work to be a good citizen and many Christians simply take the path of apathy and indifference.
- “It is plain from the immediate context, as from the general context of the apostolic writings, that the state can rightly command obedience only within the limits of the purposes for which it has been divinely instituted—in particular, the state not only *may* but *must* be resisted when it demands the allegiance due to God alone.” (*Oscar Cullmann quoted by F.F. Bruce, Romans, pp. 235-36*)
- “The obedience which the Christian man owes to the State is never absolute but, at the most, partial and contingent. It follows that the Christian lives always in a tension between two competing claims; that in certain circumstances disobedience to the command of the State may be not only a *right* but also a *duty*.” (*Sir T.M. Taylor, ibid*)

...and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves.

- Those who rebel against the authority of the state will be punished and the judgment or punishment will come *through* the governing authority but it is ultimately *from* God Himself.

3 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. 4 For he is God's servant to do you good.

- **Servant** – *diakonos* – *deacon*. Just as we have deacons in the church who serve the body of Christ, so government authorities are servants of God who are to serve the people for their good.
- These verses outline in broad terms what human government is supposed to do—why God created it. Government is to support and aid those who do what is right and to hold accountable and punish those who do wrong; to promote that which is good and restrain that which is evil.
- How are we to respond when government punishes those who are doing good and rewards those who are doing evil; when it promotes that which is evil and restrains that which is good? (Isaiah 5:20; Proverbs 29:2; 28:12)
- Regardless of what our government does, as Christian citizens we need to do what is good and right in the sight of God. (Romans 12:21)

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.

- In Roman government, the sword was a symbol of the power and authority of the ruler to enforce the law, even to the point of death.
- "Rulers must bear the sword; that is, they have the power to inflict punishment and even to take life... God has given the sword to rulers, and with it the authority to punish and even to execute. Capital punishment was ordained in Genesis 9:5-6, and it has not been abolished." (*Wiersbe, Be Right, p. 155*)
- All over the world, governments are doing away with capital punishment and decriminalizing many former illegal activities. This is another evidence of man's rebellion against God; governments are refusing to fulfill their God-given responsibility to punish evildoers and suppress evil. This is the spirit of lawlessness that is at work in our world.

5 Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience.

- Two motives for submission to authority are given here: 1) Fear of punishment—the external motivation; 2) Maintaining a clear conscience before God—the internal motivation.
- However, if the government demands that we violate our conscience, then the Christian must obey God rather than men. (Acts 5:29; Daniel 3:16-18)
- Obedience to God and His Word must take priority over obedience to any government decree. But we must examine our motives. (1 Timothy 1:5)
- If we are acting or reacting in anger to the abuses of government, it is extremely unlikely that we are doing the will of God. (James 1:19-21)

6 This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing.

- **Servant** – a term used to describe religious service. A government employee is actually a servant of God, whether he / she knows it or not.
- As a Christian government employee, it is important to remember that you are a servant of: 1) God; 2) the people; and 3) the government.
- Paul uses the same rationale here that he uses elsewhere to advocate financial supporting of those who are in full-time Christian ministry.

7 Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.

- Some Christians feel that they should not have to pay taxes because the government uses the money for evil purposes. But if we refuse to pay our taxes, we are disrespecting the law, the officials who enforce the law, and the Lord Himself.
- Pay your taxes!

May God grant to us the wisdom, perseverance and empowerment of the Holy Spirit we so desperately need to be good citizens of our nation, state and town!