

Christian Citizens
Romans 13:1-2
ABC 2/5/17

Today we come to Rom 13:1-7 which is the clearest NT teaching on our responsibility to civil authority. Every person, especially every Christian, is commanded to be in submission to their government for the sake of leading a peaceful life & having an effective witness. The 1st 11 chapters of Romans explain in detail what salvation is & how we're saved by being justified by God's grace working through faith. That is summed up by Paul in 3:21-24:

But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law & the Prophets, even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; for all have sinned & fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus.

The miracle of salvation impacts every relationship we have as Christians. 1st, & most important & obvious, is the effect on our relationship to God. When we're saved, we must present our **bodies a living & holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is our spiritual service of worship** (12:1-2). Paul's next concern is for our having a right relationship with our brothers & sisters in Christ (3-16) & with non-Christians, including even our enemies (17-21). After dealing with those matters, he focuses on our need to have a right relationship with the governments under which we live (13:1-7). Being in submission to our government is another aspect of the **good** which the Christian, seeking to **approve** the **will of God**, will live out (12:2).

Due to the religious freedom that most of us have enjoyed for generations, it's hard to fully appreciate the struggle many Christians face under regimes that restrict freedom & oppress Christianity. Many American Christians believe the rights to life, liberty, & the pursuit of happiness are not only given by God, but that this is somehow Christian & thereby justified at whatever cost, including that of armed rebellion when necessary. Believing the end sometimes justifies the means, many evangelicals contend that civil disobedience is frequently called for. Some even refuse to pay taxes because part of the money will be used for causes & activities that are unjust & immoral. This zeal for cultural Christianity often gets mixed in with emphatic views about economics, taxation, the military, & partisanship, so the Bible gets wrapped in the flag. Our focus is often shifted from the call to build God's kingdom through the gospel to efforts

to moralize culture; trying to change society from the outside rather than individuals from the inside. When the church is politicized, even in support of good causes, its spiritual power is weakened & its moral influence diluted. & when such causes are supported in worldly ways & by worldly means, the tragedy is even worse. We're to be the conscience of the nation through faithful preaching & godly living, confronting it not with the political pressure of human wisdom but with the spiritual power of God's Word. **13:1-7** PRAY

Imagine you're a struggling Christian farmer, living peacefully in colonial America when word comes that a bunch of rich politicians in Philadelphia have declared independence from Great Britain. You know what Paul teaches in Rom 13 about being in submission to the governing authorities. What should you do? Which side should you take? Or imagine you're living in Germany in the 1930's when Hitler came to power. You watch with growing horror as he begins systematically exterminating the Jews. Some of your Jewish neighbors are herded off to the death camps, never to be seen again. Then you hear about a plot to assassinate Hitler & you're invited to join the conspiracy. If Hitler could be killed, it could conceivably save the lives of millions of people. But you're aware of Rom 13, which commands you to be subject to the governing authorities. What should you do? In other words, how should Christians relate to their government? Didn't Paul write that we're citizens of another land? What does he mean by **our citizenship in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ** (Phil 3:20)? Didn't the writer of Hebrews say much the same thing? **You have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem** (12:22). You can imagine Christians arguing,

The old age has passed away; we're new creations in Christ & belong to the spiritual kingdom of Jesus. Surely we, who are even now reigning with Christ in His kingdom, need pay no attention to the ruling authorities of this passing age!

If you think I'm going to be able to give easy answers to these issues, thanks for your confidence, but I'm afraid you're too optimistic! Hopefully, none of us will ever face dilemmas as difficult as the ones I've described. But Rom 13:1-7 raises these & other important issues concerning our relationship as Christians with the government. When, if ever, is civil disobedience justifiable?

What about armed rebellion or revolution against a corrupt government? What about capital punishment? Should Christians withhold taxes to protest government misuse of our money?

At 1st glance, Rom 13:1-7 may seem to be out of context. Paul shifts subjects with no transition or introduction. But in the context, Paul is speaking about how believers are to live in love & to get along peaceably with all people. He's just forbidden taking vengeance & advocated treating with kindness those who mistreat us. This raises the natural questions, *Is it wrong to report those who mistreat us to civil authorities for prosecution? Is it wrong to use force to resist an aggressor?* So Paul shows it's proper for the government to protect law-abiding citizens & to punish evildoers. Also, Paul was writing to Christians, some of whom were Jews, in the capital of the Roman Empire. Claudius, the previous emperor, had expelled the Jews from Rome a few years before because he viewed them as dangerous (Acts 18:2). The Jews hated being under Roman rule. The Romans viewed Christians as a Jewish sect, so suspicion of revolution was always a concern in the minds of the rulers. Also, Christians easily could have taken Jesus' teaching about the coming kingdom of God to mean that they should work for the overthrow of the secular, morally corrupt government in order to help bring in Christ's kingdom. In fact, when Paul wrote Romans, Nero, one of the most evil rulers of all time, was on the throne. Nero hated Christians, had them rounded up, dipped in tar, & lit as torches for his parties. He covered Christians in animal skins & threw them to wild dogs. He ordered Rome set on fire & then blamed the Christians, setting off massive persecution.¹ We've largely forgotten how wicked pagan ancient Rome really was. Sorcery & black magic abounded, abortion flourished, homosexuality was accepted as normal, & the masses worshipped Caesar as Lord. No government in America has ever been as pagan as the government of ancient Rome. & Paul wanted the Roman Christians to be clear on how they should relate to their government. Contrary to what many Americans may think, the Bible never mandates one type of government over another. While you can argue our constitutional republic with a balance of powers is the best form of government, the Bible doesn't ordain it or forbid monarchy or other forms of government. We can sum up Rom

¹ René A. Lopez, *Romans Unlocked: Power to Deliver*, p 257

13:1-7 this way: *Because God has ordained government authority for our good, we must be subject to our government.* Here's a quick overview & then we'll look at vss 1-2. Paul 1st states that every person is to be subject to the governing authorities, because God is sovereign & ordains all human governments. Then he draws the implication: If you resist government authority, which God has established, you're opposing God Himself & you'll come under judgment. Then Paul explains that the purpose of civil government is to protect law-abiding citizens & punish law-breakers. As such, the government is acting as a minister of God in avenging wrong. Thus there are 2 reasons to be in subjection to the government: 1) Fear of punishment & 2) a clear conscience before God, who has ordained the government. Finally, Paul applies it by showing why we should pay taxes, because government officials are servants of God. Thus they deserve our taxes as well as our respect.

1. Submission to Government is the Command of God. Paul lays down a general principle in 1. Paul gives us a very clear, categorical commandment which is addressed to all mankind, without exception. *Every person* is included, both believers & unbelievers. Every person is required to be **in subjection** to the governing authorities. **Subjection** certainly includes obedience, but it implies even more. There were 3 other Greek words Paul could have used that meant *obey*, but he chose a different one, **subjection**. This was originally a military term that meant to arrange troop divisions in marching order. To submit was to take one's assigned place because it was assigned, not because of personal inferiority. Submission meant to respect the other person's rank & authority, his place in a chain of command. This includes selfless, but not blind, obedience to the extent of the other's authority. To submit is to recognize your subordinate place in a chain of command, to acknowledge as a general rule that certain people or institutions have authority over us. This includes much more than simply obeying civil laws. It includes genuine honor & respect for government officials as God's agents for maintaining order & justice in human society. & Paul gives no qualification or condition. Every civil authority is to be submitted to willingly. The authorities in view here are the *governing authorities*, those authorities which govern us politically. **Every person, every soul, is to be in subjection to the governing authorities.**

Then he explains the reason behind this principle by saying, **there is no authority except from God, & those which exist are established by God.**

2. Government is the Creation of God. God has ordained various spheres of authority for the blessing & protection of those under authority: the government, the family, the local church, & in employment. Due to sin, those in authority often misuse their authority for their own benefit. But Paul, writing under the rule of Nero, does not allow for exceptions. He states categorically, **there is no authority except from God, & those which exist are established by God.** As the Westminster Confession of Faith says, *God from all eternity did, by the most wise & holy counsel of His own will, freely & unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass.* There is no ruler anywhere or from any time in history who was not set in his position by God. No government exists or has any power except what God has given them. Like God allowing Satan to trouble Job, no authority can exist or operate or have any freedom to act unless God gives it to them whether they realize it or not. (This doesn't mean God is responsible for the evil they may do.) Therefore **every person** is to be subject to their civil government.

Some struggle with the concept that God established or ordained wicked tyrants like Nero or Hitler. They say God ordained *the institution* of government, *not* the *individual rulers*. But that seems like a weak attempt to dodge a problem that Scripture repeatedly affirms. God is sovereign over everything. A few examples, **A. Jeroboam**, who rebelled against Solomon's son, Rehoboam, set up false gods & a false worship center so his people wouldn't go to Jerusalem. Yet his rebellion & kingdom was **a turn of events from the Lord** (1 Kgs 12:15). **B. Nebuchadnezzar's** army destroyed Jerusalem, including the temple, slaughtered many Jewish people, & carried most of the survivors to Babylon. But God calls him His **servant** & says He gave all of the land he conquered into his hand (Jer 27:6). **C. Babylon** Even while God's chosen people were captive in a distant, pagan land like Babylon, God commanded them, **Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, & pray to the Lord on its behalf; for in its welfare you will have welfare.** **D. Pilate** was a pagan Roman governor who allowed Jesus to be crucified. Remember the fascinating exchange between them?

Pilate said to Him, 'You do not speak to me? Do You not know that I have authority to release You, & I have authority to crucify You?' Jesus answered, 'You would have no authority over Me, unless it had been given you from above...'" (Jn 19:10-11).

E. Satan & the Antichrist can't thwart God's purposes (Rev 13). They're under His sovereign authority, even when they persecute the saints. Daniel's testimony to both Nebuchadnezzar & Belshazzar was consistent & clear: **The Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind & bestows it on whomever He wishes** (Dan 4:17, 25, 32; 5:21). The transformed mind (12:2) recognizes that behind every authority is the hand of our Sovereign God.

Georgi Vins is a Russian pastor who, for many years before the fall of Soviet communism, suffered, along with many others, great persecution for his faith. Yet he says however severe their mistreatment was, pastors & other Christians determined to obey every law, just or unjust, with the exception of laws that would force them to cease worship or to disobey God's Word. Following Peter's admonition, they willingly suffered **for doing what is right**, but not **for doing what is wrong** (1 Pt 3:17). They would not **suffer as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler**, but would gladly suffer **as a Christian** (4:15-16). Believers are to be model citizens, known as law abiding not rabble-rousing, obedient rather than rebellious, respectful of government rather than demeaning of it. We must speak against sin, against injustice, against immorality & ungodliness with fearless dedication, but we must do it within the framework of civil law & with respect for civil authorities. We're to be a godly society, doing good & living peaceably within an ungodly society, showing our transformed lives so that the saving power of God is seen clearly. In his book *Toward a Biblical View of Civil Government*, Robert Culver writes,

Churchmen whose Christian activism has taken mainly to placarding, marching, protesting, & shouting might well observe the author of these vss (Rom 13:1-7) & then they might observe him first at prayer, then in counsel with his friends, & after that, preaching in the homes & marketplaces. When Paul came to be heard by the mighty, it was to defend his action as a preacher...of (the) way to heaven.²

Look at **vs 2**.

Because God has appointed authorities over us, we are to submit to them. & since God has appointed human rulers, the person who opposes them is opposing & is in a state of rebellion

² Quoted by MacArthur, *Romans*, p 213

against God Himself. & such opposition will lead to judgment. When Paul says that those who disobey government authority **will receive condemnation upon themselves**, I understand him primarily to be referring to the judgment government brings on law-breakers. In vs 4 he says the government **bears the sword**, which refers to the authority to punish law-breakers. He also calls it **an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil**. These expressions don't refer to God's eternal wrath, but to His wrath inflicted by the government on evildoers so it can uphold law & order. Thus, because the government is God's minister to inflict punishment on those who do evil, Christians must be in subjection to the government. God is the originator of government & to ignore it is to dishonor Him. Christians ought to be the best citizens.

3. Civil Disobedience This raises the questions, *What about civil disobedience against corrupt governments or bad laws? What about armed rebellion against evil, tyrannical governments?* Obviously, when the government commands us to do something that is disobedient to God's Word, we must resist the government & obey God. **A.** When the Sanhedrin commanded Peter & John to stop speaking in the name of Jesus, how did they reply? **Whether it is right in the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; for we cannot stop speaking about what we have seen & heard** (Acts 4:19-20). Later, when the command was repeated, Peter answered, **We must obey God rather than men** (5:29). **B.** Daniel & his 3 friends didn't eat what the king commanded because it broke the food laws God had given to the Jews (Dan 1). But it's important to notice that, even while refusing to do what God had forbidden, these 4 faithful men showed respect for the human authority they had to disobey. Speaking for them all, Daniel didn't demand conformity to their beliefs but respectfully *sought permission from the commander of the officials that he might not defile himself* (8), & he referred to themselves as the commander's **servants** (12-13). In obeying God, they didn't self-righteously or disrespectfully criticize, contend with, or condemn civil authority. What does this mean for us? If the government forced us to abort babies as a form of population control, we should resist. If the government made it illegal for us to gather as believers, we should gather anyway. If the government banned the Bible, we should own & distribute Bibles anyway. If the government commanded us not to say anything

about our faith or our Savior, we should still be witnesses. But we must understand we will face the consequences.

Should Christians ever take up arms against the government or attempt to assassinate an evil ruler? Were the 13 colonies right to declare independence from Britain? These are tough questions that must be prayerfully thought through in each situation. Godly believers differ in their conclusions. While I would agree it's wrong to murder an abortionist, which would be overcoming evil with evil (Rom 12:21), I must admit I can see the benefit of someone killing Hitler early on. I've mentioned Dietrich Bonhoeffer often as an example of standing against the evils of the Nazi regime in Germany. He's also to be commended for courageously returning to Germany from America, where he was living, to help the struggling church & give it leadership. But Bonhoeffer wasn't executed for speaking out against Nazism nor for saving Jews. He was hung for being involved in a plot to assassinate Hitler. We can understand how he might have felt that killing Hitler was the only course left to him to stop the growing evil. Killing Hitler would have saved many lives. But desperation doesn't make murder right. Sam Storms comes to this conclusion:

*Armed revolution is justified ... only if the state has become totally opposed to the purpose for which God ordained it, & if there is no other recourse available to prevent massive evil.*³

Obviously, this involves a judgment call. Some justify the American Revolution on the principle that it's morally right for a lower government official to protect the citizens in his care from a higher official who is committing crimes against these citizens. This view goes back to Calvin's *Institutes*.⁴ Again, I know that godly thinkers disagree on this. It's not an easy issue. But the general principle is clear & exceptions to it must be weighed very carefully: Since God has ordained government authority, we must be in subjection to it or we are in rebellion against God Himself.

One of the best indicators of a true believer is someone who willingly submits to God-given authority over them. This theme of submission runs throughout Scripture: submission to God,

³ www.samstorms.com/all-articles/post/romans-13:1-14

⁴Wayne Grudem, *Politics According to the Bible* [Zondervan], p. 89, italics his

children to parents, wives to husbands, Christians to church leadership, & all to government authority. Think of this: Even Jesus submitted to His Father. If you can't submit to human authority what makes you think you're in submission to God's authority?

- Submission doesn't mean you always agree with the gov't
- Submission doesn't mean you can't work to change the gov't
- Submission doesn't mean you must sin if the gov't tells you to

Submission means we're to respect & obey civil laws & ordinances, & we're to do it ungrudgingly. Even when conscience leaves us no alternative but to disobey human authority, we do so with respect & with willingness to suffer whatever penalties or consequences may result. Regardless of the failures of government, we're to pray & live peaceful lives that influence the world by godly, selfless living, not by protests, hashtags, sit-ins, & marches, much less by rebellion. Like the prophets of the OT, we have both the right & the obligation to confront & oppose the sins & evils of our society, but only in the Lord's way & power. In this way, says Paul, our living is **good & profitable for men** (Titus 3:8), because it shows them the power of God in salvation. They see what a person saved from sin is like.

4. Observations Let me make 6 quick observations. **A.** The Christian is to obey the civil laws of government, regardless of that government's response to the gospel. **B.** We aren't to believe that a moral government or a moral nation is necessary to have a thriving church. When Paul wrote the letter to the Romans, the culture was at its most depraved level. There were no sexual norms & heterosexuality was considered prudish; the emperor publicly married both a man & women; pedophilia, adultery, & idolatry were rampant. This was the century that Christ determined was the century in which to plant His church & the church thrived. **C.** It isn't necessary for the church to have influence & freedom in order to be faithful! The persecuted church always surprises us with its incredible growth. **D.** We aren't commanded to battle cultural immorality or even expected to diminish it; but to demonstrate purity. Have you ever noticed that a lighthouse never once calmed a storm? It never redirected a hurricane. It never calmed the roaring ocean. The church is a lighthouse. We shine brightest when culture is darkest. We are called to be in submission to whatever government is over us. & our relationship to society isn't

to reform it, but to redeem it, one person at a time. A man with good morals will die & go to hell as quickly as a man with bad morals. Our mission as Christians & as a church is not to make bad people good or good people better. Our mission isn't moral reformation at all, but spiritual reformation. Politics can never save a person. Only the gospel of Jesus can give a person a new nature. E. We've never been told to depend upon God & at the same time, pin our hopes on a political party, a politician, or on reversing cultural trends. The moment we believe this, we miss the purpose & mission of the church to make disciples. F. We haven't been called by God to save America, any more than Paul was to save Rome, or Martin Luther was to save Germany, or Charles Spurgeon was to save England. We have not been called by God to save America. We've been called to save Americans. America will one day fall, heaven will not. In the meantime this is the mission of the church & of every Christian: Make disciples, baptizing them & teaching them to obey what Jesus has commanded us to do (Mt 28:19-20). We must be satisfied with obedience to this unique commission from God. We have weapons the world does not have; we have power the governments of the world could not imagine. We have One who is living within us who is greater than he that is in the world. We are standing on the rock in the middle of a storm. We are ambassadors of the King. sent to introduce our world to the gospel of Jesus Christ because **it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes** (Rom 1:16). Our job is to show the world the love of God & introduce those around us to the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. We will do this most effectively when we relate to others with humility, love, & respect. If we submit to those in authority over us, whether in the home, at school, the workplace, the church, or in government, we will be most effective in our primary goal of honoring & obeying God & pointing others to Jesus. PRAY

Men come for communion

We come to the communion table once again today to remember what Jesus has done for each of us who places their faith in Him. It is only through Him that we are brought into God's family, become citizens of His kingdom, & are given a new life to live here & now & forever with Him.

Peter writes,

For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth; and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting *Himself* to Him who judges righteously; and He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed (2:21-24).

We eat of the bread remembering that Jesus bore the punishment for our sins so we might die to sin & live to righteousness.

Peter also wrote:

Therefore, prepare your minds for action, keep sober *in spirit*, fix your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts *which were yours* in your ignorance, but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all *your* behavior; because it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy."

If you address as Father the One who impartially judges according to each one's work, conduct yourselves in fear during the time of your stay *on earth*; knowing that you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, *the blood* of Christ (1 Pt 1:13-19).

We drink of the cup remembering Jesus' sacrifice, shedding His precious blood, & dying for us.