

Government's Ministry
Romans 13:3-5
ABC 2/12/17

The book of Romans is all about the gospel of Jesus Christ. In chapters 1-11 Paul logically lays out the doctrines of sin, salvation, justification, & sanctification. Beginning in chpt 12 he gives the practical application of these doctrines. In other words, he tells us how we're to live out the gospel in our everyday lives. Since we've been saved & set apart to God, by His mercy we're to commit ourselves to a certain kind of living. This includes how we're to relate to the governing authorities over us. In Rom 13:1-7 we're told we have 2 basic obligations to the government under which we live: To be in subjection to it & to pay taxes. Last week we looked at vss 1-2 & saw that God is sovereign & no governing authority is in power without God putting them there. We're to be in submission to them because if we aren't, we're rebelling against God. Obviously, this raises all kinds of questions that I don't have the answers for. But I do know this, I'm grateful to live under a government that isn't like Rome in Paul's day. We're blessed in this country, no matter what you may think of our current political state. Our situation is certainly different from Paul's as he wrote this. Nero was in charge & he wasn't known as the most compassionate guy around. Paul says we're to be in subjection to the government, whatever it is. This isn't based on the form of government, the goodness of government, or the theology of government. Our subjection is simply a matter of obedience to the plan of God. He has ordained governments for the protection of life & property, which is for our good. Today we'll see several more reasons why we're to be in submission to the governing authorities. As a side-note, if this is a subject that interests you I'd recommend you get Wayne Grudem's book, *Politics According to the Bible*. Although you may not agree with everything he says, he will make you think. Just imagine, 619 pages devoted to the subject of Christians & government! **1-7** PRAY

Paul is presenting the general purpose & practice of government: To protect those who do right & punish those who do wrong. Granted, there have been many exceptions. Bad governments often punish law-abiding citizens who speak out against the corruption & they reward rascals who help keep them in power. But when governments function as they're supposed to, they

protect law-abiding citizens & punish law-breakers. God's purpose for human government is to reward those who do good & to punish those who do evil. This is consistent with & complimentary to the purposes we have as Christians. Paul wrote in **12:9**...

We should abstain from evil & pursue what's good, right? & governments should praise those who do good & punish those who do evil. Therefore, God's purposes for us & for government are in harmony. Government is here to help us do what God has called us to do & what we should want to do. Twice in vs 4 Paul calls government **a minister of God**, literally a deacon of God for good. Government is the deacon of God, & as with every deacon, its job is to humbly serve. Is that how you think of government? It sounds odd to us because most of us don't associate government with ministry. Paul simply means that human authorities serve the purpose of God on earth. Think about that: The police officer who patrols your neighborhood is God's deacon. So is the IRS agent who audits your return. President Obama was God's servant & President Trump is God's minister. & so is Vladimir Putin of Russia. The same is true for every human leader, whether they know it or not. That's useful to remember because we often look at government with distrust or disdain. Instead we should honor & appreciate rulers for the good they do provide. Wherever & whenever & however government laws & leaders are serving that function under God, we can & should be thankful for that. As Christians, we ought to lead the way in showing honor to human authorities because we understand they're appointed by God. This touches all of us at a personal level when we see politicians making decisions that are sometimes clearly evil. There are times when we must speak out in favor of what is right & against what is wrong. In our society today, we have many means of legal, honorable opposition to laws & leaders of government when they fail to promote good & punish evil. The most powerful thing we can do always is to pray. But no matter how stirred up we may be, when we speak to those in authority or when we speak about those in authority, we must treat them with respect, without regard to how we feel about their decisions, because they are God's servants whom God has appointed & we can't treat that lightly. Titus 3:2 tells us **to malign no one**. I don't know about you, but that's convicting. I like to slander & smear politicians I don't agree with. But

even while contending against the worst of sins committed by the worst of sinners, we must never stoop to maligning those whose sin we detest. **Malign** is to slander, curse, and treat with contempt, and it can never be done from a righteous motive. Let's look at what God has for us through Paul this morning.

1. Government Restrains Evil (3a) God designed government to enforce basic justice. Of course, final justice will be enforced by God, either by applying Christ's death to pay for believers' sins or by punishing unbelievers for their sins. So government only deals with basic justice, not ultimate justice. This is why we have sheriff's deputies & FBI agents & TSA agents & homeland security & the different branches of the military. Fear of punishment is useful both as a deterrent, scaring people from committing crimes & as a consequence, justly punishing those who commit crimes. Rulers are to bring terror to those who do evil. That's a basic function of government. Since God's purpose for civil governments is to protect law-abiding citizens & punish law-breakers, it follows that we should use civil authorities for protection & due process. After all, we're not to take our own revenge (12:19). Paul used government authority on his behalf in Philippi, where he was unjustly beaten & imprisoned without a trial although he was a Roman citizen. When the authorities realized their error & wanted to quietly get him out of town, Paul wouldn't stand for it (Acts 16:35-40). He also invoked his Roman citizenship to avoid a scourging & to appeal to Caesar rather than face a kangaroo court (Acts 22:25; 25:11). In Acts 16 we see an occasion where government acted against Paul. In Acts 19 we see it act in his defense & rescue him from a mob. There are times when government may overstep its bounds & there are times when it does what it should. In either case, we need to be submissive. God planned & sustains government to keep order in society & uphold His moral law & act with force when it's broken.

2. Government Promotes Good (3a, 3c, 4a) Are you afraid of those who are over you? If you do right you have nothing to fear. Admittedly, Paul is speaking of an ideal situation. Still, the principle holds true. Troublemakers get in trouble while those who play by the rules don't. In a fallen world, things sometimes get turned upside down, but it's still better to be a law-abiding citizen. When we read that government is God's minister for good & that rulers should praise

good & punish evil, we need to ask who defines good & evil? What these vss assume is that good & evil have objective standards that transcend government authority. In other words, rulers don't make up their own definitions of what is good & what is evil. God made those definitions & hard-wired them into the human heart (Rom 1) & then revealed them in His Word. If good & evil are up to each one to define for ourselves, then I'm coming to your house to steal your stuff & I'll hire someone to beat you up if you complain! No one will honestly agree that's right or good. God has built into the heart of man a sense of what is right & wrong in very basic terms. So government is put in place by God for the purpose of preserving life & protecting property. It's senseless to insist that no higher standard of good & evil exists because that leads to absolute chaos & anarchy. Similarly, honesty, integrity, faithfulness, love, generosity, service, kindness, mercy, gratitude are all things viewed & valued as good. Only the biblical view of God giving His standard for good & evil & putting it into the human conscience makes sense of life on earth. When we understand Rom 13 rightly, we see the fingerprints of God all over His creation. & some of those fingerprints are the functions of government. Christians should be the model of what a citizen should be in society. That enables those who are the servants of God in government to see in them something unique & attractive. Robert Haldane says,

*The institution of civil government is a dispensation of mercy, & its existence is so indispensable, that the moment it ceases under one form it re-establishes itself in another.*¹

To rebel against government is to resist God, & to resist God brings judgment because government serves to restrain evil & promote good.

3. Government Uses the Sword Did you notice the reference to the sword in vs 4? What's that all about? The **sword** represents the punishing power of the state. This is so important to God that vs 4 explains civil authority's role as being **an avenger who brings wrath** upon the one who practices evil. Since that word for **avenger** is used for God Himself in 1 Thes 4:6, we know this is a serious role. It's the same root word in Rom 12:19 where it says vengeance belongs to the Lord & we as individuals shouldn't take our own revenge. The state is given the responsibility of vengeance, a responsibility that's explicitly forbidden to individuals (12:19). The state renders

¹¹ *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Romans*, p 581

evil for evil (12:17), which we must never do. God's way of dealing with evil isn't by personal vengeance, but through justice dispensed by the state. One reason why we shouldn't is because God will right all wrongs in eternity & He's the ultimate Judge who'll handle it perfectly. But another reason we don't get into personal revenge is because God put governing authority in the place of **avenger**. In ancient Rome what was the sword used for? You don't spank or fine people with a sword. You kill people with a sword, right? Paul is saying that government is given the right to inflict the punishment of death. According to tradition, Paul himself experienced this when Nero had him beheaded. This reference to the sword provides the Christian basis both for service in the armed forces (& for there being just wars) as well as the theological justification for capital punishment. God says that the state does have the right to take life, not erratically or unjustly, but in certain cases it's clearly justified. We should be thankful that government **does not bear the sword for nothing**, even though it bears it imperfectly. God has invested the state with the power to inflict punishment. As Robert Culver has written,

*No society can successfully vote fines, imprisonment, corporeal & capital punishment away permanently. The society which tries has lost touch with realities of man, realities of the world, & the truth of divine revelation in nature, man's conscience, & the Bible.*²

The sword isn't merely a sign or symbol of the state's authority to enforce its laws but also a power to execute (Lk 21:24; Acts 12:2). Dare I open this Pandora's box of worms? What's the Bible say about capital punishment? Do governments have the biblical & moral authority to inflict capital punishment? I believe they do. If this verse just taught the right of capital punishment without the practice of it, then presumably taxation is also only a symbol of the authority & doesn't refer to the actual taking of money from people. Of course, that's an impossible interpretation. Likewise, it's inconceivable to consider this as teaching only the government's right to use capital punishment without the actual exercise of that right. As Christians, we can thank God that government has the right to use the sword. I don't like to think of people losing their lives, but I think the way to stop people from murdering each other is to make it very clear that if you take a life, you'll lose yours. That protects the sanctity of life. We could spend a lot of

² *Toward a Biblical View of Civil Government*, p 256

time on this, a series of sermons even, but just quickly this morning. Any discussion of this must include Gen 9:5-6

Is this a statement of fact or a divine command? Is it predictive or prescriptive? Is it a forecast of what the consequences of murder will be or is it God's endorsement for capital punishment? The Hebrew grammar permits either view. If this is merely predictive, the point of the text is that divine retribution against the murderer will take its course & will sooner or later catch up with the killer. In other words, God's providence will ultimately insure that they're brought to justice. But 5b speaks of God's requiring the life of the murderer from the hand of man. If God requires the death of the murderer, it seems reasonable that in vs 6 he commands it be done. This is made clear in the Law of Moses which clearly requires that murderers be put to death. Experience tells us that not all murderers have had their blood shed by other men.

So was this command just for then or is it for always & everywhere? The basis for the command is that man is created in the image of God (6). To kill a person was equivalent to killing God in effigy. Man is still in the image of God. Thus the rationale for capital punishment isn't tied to any cultural or historical or socio-economic events but to a truth regarding man that is universally relevant. But someone may say, the 6th commandment (Ex 20:13) forbids killing. No, it doesn't. It's a prohibition against the unlawful taking of an innocent life. God commanded Israel to kill their enemies during the conquest of Canaan (Dt 20:10-13). Clearly, this commandment does not prohibit all life-taking because in the next chapter we read that God commands capital punishment for murder. Ex 21:12.¹

So was the Mosaic law strict, oppressive, heartless, & cruel in its application of capital punishment? No, not unless God & His law are oppressive, heartless, & cruel. The fact is, the Mosaic Law represents a massive reduction in capital offenses from the original list. As RC Sproul puts it, *the OT code represents a bending over backwards of divine patience & forbearance. The OT law is one of astonishing grace.*³ The original law of the universe is that **the person who sins will die** (Ezekiel 18:20). Life is a divine gift, not a debt. Sin brings the loss of the gift of life. Once

³ *The Holiness of God*, p 148

a person sins he forfeits any claim on God to human existence. The fact that we continue to exist after sinning is owing wholly to God's mercy & gracious longsuffering. We think we deserve to live & that God owes us life. The fact that God made only 15-20 sins capital offenses was a remarkable act of mercy, compassion, & grace. Why? Because it would have been perfectly just & fair & righteous had He made every sin a capital offense. We won't take the time to look at Jn 8:1-11, but look at Acts 25:11.

Paul recognized there were some crimes that were worthy of death. How many or which ones he doesn't say but at minimum, murder is in view. Paul says he'd offer no resistance should he be found guilty of such a crime. Implicit in this is Paul's belief that the governing authority had the right to inflict capital punishment. He didn't rebuke or denounce the government for seizing a right it didn't rightfully possess. Though capital punishment a hotly debated political issue today, it's not a vague or questionable issue in the Bible. It was clear from the very beginning that a life taken by a human requires payment of a human life in punishment. Because mankind is made in God's image, to shed their blood & kill them requires a life lost in payment of the penalty. God knows that when capital punishment is executed properly, it becomes a terror to evildoers & restrains them from doing evil. God requires the death penalty not so He can kill people, but so people won't be killed. When the law of the land is made according to the law of God, it restrains criminals.

The general principle is that since God has ordained government authority, we must be subject to it. The purpose for government is to protect law-abiding citizens & punish law-breakers. & while there's debate on capital punishment, most of what Paul writes is very simple: (1) submit to governing authorities & (2) see God above & behind those authorities because God designed government (A) to uphold basic morality & (B) to enforce basic justice. Why do we submit to government? Because God tells us to & because we don't want to be punished.

4. Conscience (5) We support human government because of **wrath**, meaning we fear punishment if we don't. That's why if you're being honest in your shopping, you don't worry about the cameras watching you. It's why if you're driving your car legally & properly, you don't

fear a police checkpoint or a hidden car you pass unexpectedly. No fear exists when you're doing good deeds. But there's a better reason to submit to government. The better motivation to support government is **for conscience sake.** 5

Instead of treating us as we might treat an animal, training it to respond by rewarding desired behavior & punishing undesirable behavior, Paul treats people as responsible moral agents, as humans made in God's image, by appealing to our conscience. Submission for the sake of the conscience is better than submission for the sake of the wrath. It's one thing to want to avoid punishment, but it's far better to want to avoid a guilty conscience & enjoy a clean conscience. The human conscience is God's internal alarm inside us that convicts our hearts & minds when we violate what we know is right. The conscience responds to the moral law written on our heart by giving affirmation or accusation (Rom 2:14-16). Of course, the conscience can become misinformed when truth is silenced or it becomes seared or burned in a way that it's no longer sensitive to sin. The conscience can be a wonderful help when it's freed from such errors & informed with clearly biblical truth. We must be subject to our government not only because we fear punishment if we break the law, but also because we fear God, who knows our hearts. This makes obeying the laws of government not just a matter of outward compliance, but also of inward obedience to God. You don't need to be subject to government only because you fear the consequences, but also because you know it is right. The higher motive is to conform not only for wrath's sake, but also for conscience's sake. We know what is right when we love the law, having a firm commitment to obey God. That's the higher & purer motive. That's what Peter meant when he said, **Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution** (1 Pt 2:13). Do you obey the law because you're afraid of what will happen if you don't? Do you govern your life by fear, or do you think about obeying the law for the sake of honoring your Lord? The norm should be Christian submission to those in authority over us because God put them there & we honor His authority. We may disagree. We may vote against someone or a ballot measure. We will call & write letters to our representatives. But we must never join the ranks of the anarchists who want all governments done away with. Even bad government is better than no government at all.

We as Christians ought to be known as law-abiding citizens. Insurrection & lawlessness never advance the cause of Christ. If we believe what Paul said, it will make us better Christians & ultimately better citizens. We may disagree, even strongly & passionately, but we won't resort to violence.

Once again, Rom 2:14-16 describes the conscience as working even in those who've never had a Bible. Why? Because God put the law on every heart. & Rom 3:19-20 explains that God also gave His written law to show every person that we're sinners with no excuse. God wants us to see the bad news of the law that condemns us under His judgment to eternal punishment. But God made that bad news clear so we would clearly see our need for His good news. God's good news, the gospel, is that God provided a payment for the punishment of sin in Jesus' death. & God provides the righteousness we don't have in Jesus' perfect life if we turn from ourselves & trust in Him. Then God proved all this by raising Jesus from the grave. So as bad as the bad news is that we're all doomed to Hell if left to ourselves, the good news is even better. If we trust Jesus then His death frees us from hell's penalty & gives us new life now & forever instead. That's amazing & it's all by God's free grace in Christ. & the wonder of it all is that God is still righteous in doing this because He satisfied the just requirements of His law by punishing our sins on Jesus on the cross (Rom 3:25-26). That's good news! God gave His law to show us our sin & our need for a Savior. But God also hard-wired basic morality into every human heart as a way to restrain evil & maintain order in society. A sundial is only worthwhile when the sun is shining on it. In the same manner, the conscience is only valuable when it's illuminated by God's Word.

With all this being said, what is required of every Christian?

1. To be subject to the government unless it asks us to disobey God (Rom 13:1; 1 Pt 2:13-14; Acts 4:19-20; 5:29; Dan 1, 3, 6).
2. To grant proper honor to those in authority (Rom 13:7; 1 Pt 2:17).
3. To do right & cooperate with government authorities whenever possible (Titus 3:1-2; 1 Pt 2:15).
4. To pay taxes (Rom 13:6-7; Mt 22:17-21). But that's for next time.
5. To pray for those in authority over us (1 Tim 2:1-2).

6. To evangelize & disciple government leaders when possible (1 Tim 2:3-4; Mt 28:19; Paul's example with Felix, Festus, Agrippa, & others).
7. To be informed & vote for candidates & issues which will, to the best degree possible, uphold God's purposes for government (Mt 5:13-16; Titus 3:1). The Bible doesn't address voting directly because democracy wasn't practiced then. But since we're given a say in who rules over us, not to vote is to allow the ungodly to win.

If there's any argument with God about His justice being too stringent or rigid or exacting, realize it is right. He is God, you are not. When you're stolen from you want to be paid back in full. Likewise, God should be paid back when His glory is stolen or ignored. Yet God will not give everyone what they deserve. If you turn from your sin & place your faith in Jesus, then you'll be forgiven & God will count Christ's death as the full payment for your sins & show you His marvelous mercy. That is the gospel & that's the reason we live in submission to government & pray for our leaders. The goal isn't merely for us to live comfortable lives. The goal is for us to boldly spread the gospel of Jesus & to enjoy the strengthening of gathering together to celebrate, remember, & more deeply study & apply the gospel to our lives.

ⁱ The death penalty in the Mosaic Law was called for in numerous cases:

- 1) premeditated murder (Ex. 21:12-14);
- 2) kidnapping (Ex. 21:16; Dt. 24:7);
- 3) striking a parent (Ex. 21:15; the word means "to attack with great force," not merely slap; i.e., it is attempted murder by severely beating someone);
- 4) cursing a parent (Ex. 21:17; a repudiation of parental authority; a verbal despising of them);
- 5) sacrificing to a false god; idolatry (Ex. 22:20);
- 6) sorcery/magic (Ex. 22:18);
- 7) breaking the Sabbath (Ex. 35:2);
- 8) adultery (Lev. 20:10-21);
- 9) homosexuality (Lev. 20:13);
- 10) incest (Lev. 20:11-12,14);
- 11) bestiality (Lev. 20:15-16);
- 12) human sacrifice (Lev. 20:2);
- 13) blasphemy (Lev. 24:11-14,16,23);
- 14) incorrigible juvenile delinquency (Dt. 17:12; 21:18-21; this is not a young teen but an "older youth"; this deals, not with a one-time outburst, but with a settled disposition; note the public trial);
- 15) false prophecy (Dt. 13:1-10);
- 16) fornication (Dt. 22:20-21);
- 17) rape (Dt. 22:23-27);
- 18) idolatry (Dt 17:2-7);
- 19) keeping an ox known to be dangerous if the ox had killed a human (Ex 21:29);
- 20) intrusion of an alien into a sacred place (Num 1:51; Num 3:10, 38; Num 18:7).

In the case of all these offenses (with the exception of murder), it was usually possible to pay a ransom or make some form of monetary or property settlement & have the sentence commuted. (See Num 35:31.)