

Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

The Christian's Responsibility to Government, Part 1

Scripture: Romans 13:1

Code: 45-97

Let's open our Bibles to Romans chapter 13. And I feel a little bit like a man who has just eaten a huge meal and is standing in front of a smorgasbord. There's so much here, and I don't really know how much I'm going to be able to handle. After this morning's time in the Word, this seems almost more than we can receive.

And I'm not in a hurry with this passage because I think it is a very important one, and makes some very significant demands on our thought, and so I don't want to hurry. I want to be careful to properly ascertain and share with you its significance.

Nor do I want to sermonize and find cute little homilies and ways to attract your attention. I basically want you to understand the passage. And I'll do the best I can tonight to lay the groundwork that'll make this passage open up to you.

But to begin with, we need to read the first seven verses so we know what it is we're referring to. Romans, chapter 13, beginning at verse 1.

"Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but from God; the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever, therefore, resisteth the power, resisteth the institute of God, and they that resist shall receive to themselves judgment. 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 for nothing. For he is the minister of God, an avenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil.

Wherefore ye must needs be subject. Not only for wrath, but also for conscience' sake. For, for this cause pay ye taxes also. For they are God's ministers, attending continually upon this very thing.

Render therefore to all their dues - taxes to whom taxes are due, custom to whom custom, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor."

Now in those seven verses we have outlined for us in brief and pointed terms the Christian's responsibility to government. This is the most clear, the most direct, the most straightforward and

precise passage in all of the New Testament on this subject. And as a result of that, it is an extremely important one for us to understand.

The issue of the Christian's relationship to government is a very important issue. It has been through all of the church's history. Christians have always had to face this issue, and even to struggle with it. Where the church has found itself in all kinds of places, in all kinds of governments, under all kinds of rulers, with all kinds of perspectives and forms of leading and ruling. And so Christians have always had to deal with this matter of how do you respond to your government?

Traditionally and historically in our own country we have had less trouble with this than many others. Say for example, our brothers and sisters in Christ who are in China or behind the Iron Curtain, or in Russia. Because we have lived in a somewhat Christian influenced society, we've had the best of situations. And the most benevolent of governments. But it hasn't always been that way for Christians as it wasn't for those in the New Testament times when this was written. Even for the believers in Rome who received this very letter.

But Christians, even though they have struggled to answer the question of what is their relationship to government, have not always answered it properly.

And throughout the history of the church, there have been revolutions in the name of Christianity where people decided that the Christian thing to do was to revolt militarily against the government that's in power, and demand their rights. There have even been wars in the name of Christianity.

And so Christians have struggled with this, and sometimes they have rightly understood what their role was, and sometimes they have overturned their God-given role and become revolutionary. There has been violation of law in the name of Christianity. I don't know if you realize this, but there have been, even in our own country, certain law violations, civil disobedience, subversive attempts to overthrow the powers that be on a local level, a state level, or a national level that in some cases were led by people who claimed to be Christians. All of this in the name of Christ.

Some Christians have decided that since they have received bad treatment from certain governments, it is justifiable for them to war against those governments. And in case you think this is far-a-field, may I remind you that for some people evangelical Christianity was their justification for the American Revolution. There are those people who feel that America was borne out of a revolution which was justified, and we had every right to load up our guns and kill Englishmen for the sake of our religious freedom.

There are some Christians even today whom I know personally who refuse to pay their taxes, because they feel they violate their freedoms.

The truth of the matter is, and you need to think about this - the truth of the matter is that our own nation was borne out of a violation of this biblical text. Now that may throw you for a loss, but that's the fact. Our nation was borne out of a violation of this text. In the name of Christian freedom.

That does not mean that God doesn't overrule such violations and bring about good, which He did in this case, but that doesn't justify the means. And still today we struggle with how we should identify with our government because even though America had sort of a Christian orientation, we are now living in I suppose what we could call post-Christian America.

And though we are fortunate to have a President who affirms the Christian faith, and who holds to Christian standards of ethics and morality, our government no longer upholds the Bible as a source of truth, Biblical morality as a source of what is right, and we are fast seeing all of that kind of thing eroding from our country. And so some people believe that we, as Christians then, because America seems to be losing its Christian orientation, have a right to protest, have a right to defy the law, to break the law.

Many Christian leaders are calling for other Christians to leave their present operation, their present Ministry, and become a part of a new political Christian lobby to use high pressure, social actions, so forth. Some are calling for anger, and protests, and a moderate kind of revolution against our government.

They say the government is taking churches' freedoms away. It is encroaching on religion. And in an effort to save the freedom of the church, a myriad of organizations are arising in our country calling for action against the government. I am amazed at how many evangelical Christians who 15 years ago wouldn't have been caught dead in such activity, are now very aggressively pursuing this political lobbying approach.

And I'm also equally amazed at the cobelligerents that wind up coming together on issues of civil authority and civil rights that would never find any common ground on the issue of truth. For example, many evangelicals are now aligned with Sun Myung Moon and the "Moonies" because they have a common cause for religious freedom.

So the coming together of these kinds of people in very strange ways as cobelligerents demonstrates this preoccupation with political ends, where theology and doctrine of Biblical truth are set aside for the sake of freedom.

I received recently an invitation to the inauguration of the President, and it was nice. I'm glad they invited me, and also to the ball, which goes along with it. I'm not going, by the way. To either. But because of that, I received a letter the other day which was a follow-up to that letter from a new

group. I can't even remember the name, but it's something to do with Christian action in Washington, inviting me to come to a very special banquet and stand together with all these people to hold Christian freedoms in America. And I went down the list of people involved in that, and I wrote back and said I couldn't come, and I couldn't associate because I wouldn't be able to identify myself with those people.

It amazes me that you have a list of true believers, charlatans, frauds, false prophets - all jumbled together for the sake of "religious freedom" to do the political lobbying that people think is going to preserve the kingdom of God in America.

One of the worst fallouts of this new preoccupation with the political issues, this new politicizing of the church, is that ultimately the Ministry of the church is prostituted. And people are selling themselves for something short of that to which the church is called. The church cannot afford to become just a flag-waving, lobbying, protesting voice for government change. That's not our calling. And I'm appalled to note that many Pastors have turned from an emphasis on the Gospel to an emphasis on politics. From an emphasis on teaching the Bible to an emphasis on coalitions to support particular legislation. And all of this is based upon some ridiculous premise that Christianity's growth and power and impact is somehow related to the government policy in America.

C.S. Lewis once reminded Christians that human beings live forever, while the state is only temporal, and thus is reserved to comparative insignificance. And to spend your time altering the state when you could be spending your time giving people eternal salvation is a bad bargain.

To abandon the message which gives to that eternal soul life with God in favor of temporal change prostitutes and wastes the light. I mean it would be like a great heart surgeon with a skill to save many, abandoning his life-saving practice to become a makeup artist. To fool around with the outside. And ignore the skill which could save men's lives.

Seems to me that the church needs to use all of its power and all of its resources, and all of its energy and forces to convert men and women to Jesus Christ. And that's what God has called us to do. The Scripture speaks not at all about Christians engaging in politics. It has nothing to say about it. Other than the fact that we're to be model citizens, it says nothing.

It speaks not at all about Christians engaging in civil change. That is not our priority. It doesn't mean we're not to be involved as citizens where we can be. It's a question of priority.

In the Old Testament, for example, Israel was a priestly nation. And by God's design, Israel was to bring men to God. And in that nation Israel there were priests whose primary function was to do just that. There were others who could take care of the menial things, and the problems, the social issues. But the heart of the matter was the priesthood, the core of life which gave its identity to the whole

nation, and they could not abandon the role of bringing men and women to God. That was God's design.

The church is the same. I believe we are a kingdom of priests, not a kingdom of politicians. That our design in the world is to bring men to God. You say, don't you care about change? Of course I care about change, but I also know that changes from inside, not outside. Right?

We must administrate the things of God. We must administrate the kingdom of God. So as we approach this whole issue of the Christian's role in government, I want you to understand from the very beginning that what we're saying has nothing to do with politicizing the church. It has nothing to do with lobbying. Has nothing to do with getting involved in those things which are good, but not our divine calling and priority. There is no biblical mandate for us to spend time, money, and energy in politicking or engaging in the matters of civil government.

We are to be - and listen carefully, this is an important thought - we are to be the conscience of the nation by Godly living and faithful preaching. We confront the nation. Not through political pressure, but through the word of God. That's how we confront the nation. We preach against sin. We preach against the evils of our time. But it is preaching and Godly living that is our calling.

Look at Christ for just a moment as we build a foundation for this passage. Look at Christ. He came into a very interesting world. He came into a Roman Empire where slavery flourished. Slavery. You understand that. Slavery. There were three slaves - approximately three slaves to every free man.

He also came into a world that was dominated by absolutism in terms of rulership. Men were absolutely monarchs, absolute rulers. After the end of the Roman republic, when the Caesars came in and took power, they ruled with absolute authority. And although Julius Caesar was murdered in the Roman senate in 44 BC, this only accelerated the centralization of power. The Roman senate declared Augustus proconsul and tribune of Rome for life, and he had absolute and total power. He was Commander In Chief of all soldiers, he stood above the senate, and he controlled all civil affairs.

So Jesus came into a world dominated by slavery and by one man rule. The absolute antithesis of democracy, which we believe to be so dear. All the power of the state was in one man's hands.

You had the same thing in Palestine. Where the ruler of Palestine, who was placed there as sort of a puppet king under Rome was a man by the name of Herod. Herod was an Edomite. Herod was not a Jew. That Edomite ruler of Palestine, the king with great power, had the single authority to demand that every single baby in a certain region be massacred, and nobody could stay his hand. He had absolute authority over life and death. He murdered his whole family. His mother, his wife, his sons, and no one held him accountable.

In the time that Jesus came into the world taxes were exorbitant, and those who worked in the taxing process who sold themselves to Rome for money, exacted exorbitant taxes out of the people, overcharged them. In fact, you remember don't you, that Zacchaeus when he was converted, immediately said I'll do what? I'll pay back everything I've extorted how many times? Fourfold. Which was rather typical of the kind of thing that went on. Tax collectors were extortioners.

So there were unjust taxes. There was unjust rule that heard nothing from the people. In fact, Caesar August decreed that all the world should be taxed, and tried to collect an exact from everyone.

Furthermore, Jesus came to His people, the Jews, in a very unique situation for them. They were chattel for the Romans. They were an underprivileged and oppressed minority. They had no voice in Roman government, they had to pay heavy taxes to their Roman taskmasters. Now that's the world Jesus came into. They didn't even know anything about democracy. About voting. About certain "freedoms" that we enjoy.

And what did Jesus say? He said this. "Render to Caesar," what? "The things that are Caesar's." You give the government its due. And to God, what? The things that are God's.

He did not come with power and force to overthrow the Roman tyranny. He did not seek social change. He did not attempt to eliminate slavery. He did not come with political or economic issues at stake. They were not the concern of his life and Ministry. He did not come to bring new government, to bring democracy, to wave the flag of Judaism, even. His appeal was ever and always to the hearts of individual men and women. Not their political freedoms. Not their rights under government.

He did not participate in civil rights. He did not crusade to abolish injustice. He preached a saving Gospel. So that once a man's soul or a woman's soul is right with God, it matters very little what the externals are. He was not interested in a new social order, but in a new spiritual order - the church. And he mandated the church to carry on the same kind of Ministry.

And listen - their problems in those days were far more severe than ours. Far more severe. Even people living on relief today have cars, TVs and modern conveniences.

So we have to look at things a little bit differently I think. When we come to this issue of how a Christian is to respond to his government. Just like I said at the very start, Christians through all the generations of the church have had to deal and struggle with this issue. And we have to come to some conclusion about how we fit in, and what are we called to do and be in this society in which we live? And what is our priority? And how are we to live? And what right does government have over us, and what is to be our proper response to that right?

And admittedly, we live in a tension. There's a tension. I mean, to be honest with you, from deep within my heart I'm really not that concerned about political issues. Economic issues. Externally social issues. Civil issues. Oh, there's a normal kind of concern about those things, but that doesn't occupy my mind. What occupies my mind are the souls of lost men and women. Does that occupy your mind?

I mean, I'm not so concerned that everybody be happy, and wealthy, and healthy as I am that people be saved. And I've only got so much energy and the church has only so much resource. And I guess I struggle a little bit with millions and millions and millions of dollars coming out of evangelical hands for politicization rather than evangelization.

We need to be concerned not about the external life of people, but the internal soul of the lost. So we ask the question then- what is our responsibility to government? How do we respond in the tension of being preoccupied with the Kingdom of God, and yet having to live in this world and wanting to be a good citizen?

First of all, as I pointed out to you, the issue is not to try to politicize the society. What God has called us to do is two things, right here in this text. Number one comes in verse one. "Let every soul be subject to the higher powers." The second one is in verse six. For this cause, pay your taxes. Now you want to hear it as simply as I can say it? The Apostle Paul says two things are required of you as a Christian - submit to the government, and pay your taxes. Did you get that?

Submit to the government and pay your taxes. That's our duty. Beyond that, you ought to be busy in the Kingdom. Right? Busy doing that thing which is eternally valuable. It isn't the other things are not important, it is that they pale in importance when compared with the work of the Kingdom. That's the issue.

So, be subject to the government, and pay your taxes. That's what Jesus meant when He said "render to Caesar." What did Caesar want? Submission and money. Submit to the rules and the laws, and pay your taxes.

Now how does this section fit into this whole epistle of Romans? Great theological epistle, and all of a sudden he gets down into this deal about submission to the government, and paying your taxes. Well listen, it fits in beautifully. It just fits beautifully. In fact, Paul ties it in really two ways here. His logic is impeccable.

The first 11 chapters tell us about being justified by grace through faith. Right? He describes what it is to be a Christian. Now that you have all this from God's gracious hand, now that you've received all this, chapter 12, verse 1, do what? What's our response? Present your body, what? A living sacrifice.

Give everything you are to the Lord. Your soul. Your body. Your mind. Your will. Give it all to Him! And so here is this idea of personal self-sacrifice. Give the Lord everything.

Now the result of that will be a proper relationship to God. You will know and prove what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God. So first of all, if I respond to the salvation God has given to me by giving Him my all, I'm going to have a right relationship with the Lord. I'm going to know His will and His purpose, and I'm going to do it.

Secondly, verses 3 through 14, he says you'll have a proper relationship with the family of God. Use your spiritual gift. Love folks, be kind to them, and so forth. All the way down through verse 13.

And then starting in verse 14 and going to verse 21, he says if your life is presented to the Lord, you're also going to have right relationships with your non-Christian friends, and even verses 17 to 21, your enemies. So the point here is that Christianity impacts every part of life. And this is really the heart of the epistle. All the stuff that he said about Salvation is just to get to this.

So he can say look, knowing what God has done for you, your response needs to be very simple. Your response to what God has done for you is to give the Lord your life. To give Him your soul, and your body, and your heart, and your mind." To give Him everything you have. And in giving Him everything that you have, you're going to find a right relationship with Him where you'll know His good and acceptable and perfect will. A right relationship with each other where you use your spiritual gift and meet each other's needs. A right relationship to outsiders where even if they persecute you, you're going to bless them. And a right relationship to people so that if they injure you, and if they seek to harm you, and if they do things evil against you, you're not even going to be avenging them.

And it follows then that if you have a life dedicated to Christ, you're not only going to have a right relationship with God, other Christians, outsiders, and enemies, but you'll have a right relationship with civil authorities, also. And they are an essential part of our life. Because government is an institution of God.

So I believe what he's saying here is a committed Christian who is solely given over to the Lord will have a right relationship to civil authority. How? By submitting himself to government, and by paying his taxes. That's the essence of what he says.

Now the connection here is marvelous really. You go back to verse 19 - well verse 17 really. "Recompense to no man evil for evil." Don't pay back evil with evil. Verse 19, don't avenge yourselves. "Vengeance is mine. I will repay, says the Lord." So if your enemy hungers, feed him, if he thirsts, give him something to drink, and so forth. Overcome evil by good verse 21 says.

So he's been talking about non-retaliation. Non-vengeance. Returning love for hate and good for evil. And so here's one way you do that. No matter what the government does, you submit. No matter what the government does, you pay your taxes. You're not violent. You're not a terrorist. You're not a subversive.

No breach of peace - no breach of peace should ever come from a Christian. Verse 18. "As much as lies in you, live peaceably with all men." Christians are not to be those who breach the peace. Who make trouble. And there's no place for personal vengeance. Verse 19. Don't avenge. God takes care of that.

If we are injured or defrauded and there is a way through our system to get back what was taken from us, that's fine. Somebody said to me last week, "You mean if somebody defrauds me in my business, and takes all my money and takes my business, I have no right to retaliate?" You have a right to go to the proper authorities to try to get back what has been lost, but no right to go beyond that and seek personal vengeance at the expense of the person who did it.

If someone takes something of mine, I can go to the authorities, I can go to whatever jurisprudence I'm able to and try to get that back if it is justifiably to be gained. But what I can't do is then turn around and try to strip that person bare of everything they possess by a selfish vengeful lawsuit. You understand the difference? We are not to be those who breach the peace, and we are not to be those who seek vengeance and retaliation. To get our pound of flesh.

You say, "Well, who's going to do that?" Who's going to make it right? Where's the justice going to come from? And the answer comes in chapter 13. Vengeance is not the role of the individual. Retaliation is not the role of the individual. Bringing evil to evil men is not the role of the individual Christian. It is the role of government.

The principle of the Old Testament - an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth, a life for a life - is a principle of government. Not of personal vengeance. So we don't retaliate, and we don't seek personal violent vengeance. It is the role of civil government to deal with those who are evildoers.

So the passage then shows us that when criminal things have been done against us, we return love for hate, good for evil, and the government will take care of proper recourse. That is the government's role, and that's where he moves in chapter 13.

So he ties it in two ways really. In the flow of the things that a Christian is rightly related to, and then as a response to this section on non-retaliation to the question, "Well, if we don't get back - if we are defrauded, who's going to get back to that person and make them pay for their crime?" The answer he comes with is, "That's the role of the government." And we'll see that unfold as we look through the passage.

Now I want to approach this passage one more way. And I'm just setting up some pillars so that everything's going to come right together for you. In Paul's day, this was a very critical issue. A very critical issue. And I want to try to give you a little historical background so you'll understand why.

And this is pretty much foundational tonight, but you have to have this. In Paul's day it was a critical issue and I'll tell you why. The Jews were notoriously zealous for their own identity, their own nation, their own independence, their own freedom, their own God, their own religion and so forth. So the Jews constantly rebelled against Roman control. There were just little fires cropping up everywhere. And even though Roman domination was, for the most part, beneficent, and the Roman peace was, for the most part, easy to bear - it was not harsh and unrealistic - still the Jews did not like the idea that they were under the yoke of anyone.

And when conversing with Jesus, you remember in John 8, they said, "We have never been in bondage to anyone." Which was a pretty ridiculous statement since they were at that very time under Roman domination. And prior to that were under the domination of the Greeks, and prior to that were under the domination of the Achaemenid Persians, and prior to that were under the domination of the Babylonians, and even earlier than that were under the domination of the Egyptians. So they had short memories.

But what they were really saying was not - we were not under domination externally, but what they were saying was "We've never been dominated in our hearts. We have never accepted that kind of bondage." So they didn't like that tyranny, and even though they enjoyed exceptional privileges in the Roman Empire.

In fact, the Roman Empire which advocated Caesar worship, and everybody was suppose to worship Caesar as a God, allowed the Jews to worship their own God. Safe-guarded their right to worship. The Romans safe-guarded the Sabbath day, the Sabbath laws, the food laws, the prohibition of idols. The Romans made a law that no one could come into the city of Jerusalem inside the walls with any image of the Caesar, because that violated Jewish idol law.

They did everything they could, and when the Jews wanted to kill gentiles who went into the inner court, the Romans upheld their right to do that. Even though that was nothing to do with the Roman law, but only with religious law of the Jews.

So they were very gracious in a sense to the Jews, and still they chafed under their authority. They hated the Roman domination. They questioned its legitimacy, they fought against it. In fact, you'll remember in Matthew 22, the passage I mentioned earlier. They came to Jesus and said, "Look, you tell us. You tell us. Do we pay our taxes or don't we?" Remember that? This was constantly on their minds. They felt that it was an absolute crime for them to acknowledge Caesar. And he said, "Show

me a coin," and they took out a coin with Caesar's image, and of course, that would be in their minds a what? An idol.

And they despised that. And Jesus said to them, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." What he was affirming was the fact that in spite of what they felt, they were obligated to submit to government. But they chafed so much under that.

And you remember Mark 15:7, which accounts for Barabbas who had led an insurrection. It wasn't the only insurrection. There were a lot insurrections. The Romans dealt with them continually. In fact, the Romans did a lot to keep the peace. One time they even put Paul in prison because they thought that Paul would be the cause of a Jewish riot, and Jewish riots could turn against them. They knew that, and so they were very cautious in imprisoning Paul not only for his own protection, but for the protection that they would gain from some kind of riot.

In Acts 5:36 we read, "Before those days rose up Theudas, boasting himself to be somebody, to whom a number of men, about four hundred, joined themselves who were slain. And all as many as obeyed him were scattered and brought to nothing. After this man, rose up Judah of Galilee in the days of registration and drew away many people after him. He also perished, and all as many as obeyed him were dispersed." The Romans were constantly breaking up these kinds of small revolutions that were started by these would-be Messiahs who were trying to overthrow the Roman yoke.

The Jews took as the basis for their hatred of the Roman yoke, and the Roman rulership. Deuteronomy 17:15. You know what that says? "Thou shalt surely set him king over thee whom the Lord thy God shall choose. One from among thy brethren shalt thou set as king over thee. Thou mayest not set a foreigner over thee, who is not thy brother." And so they said based on Deuteronomy 17:15, they were not going to have a king that was not a Jew, and Herod was not a Jew, and Caesar was not a Jew, and Pilot was not a Jew, and none of those who ruled them were Jews, and so they used that passage as a defense for their attitude towards the government.

What they forgot was they weren't living under the terms of Deuteronomy anymore. They had so violated God's covenant that they were under judgment. And those kinds of things had been set aside.

Now also among the Jews were a group of people known as the zealots. Do you remember the zealots? They believed there was no king but God period. And there should be no taxes paid to anyone but God, so they defied the government every way. They wouldn't submit, and they wouldn't pay taxes.

They embarked, the zealots did, on violent action. They started groups. They became murderers, careers of murder and assassination. They were known as dagger-bearers. They were fanatical nationalists I should say. Sworn to terrorism all their life long. And they had a great influence on the Jews. That's why when Jesus came along and the Jews saw His power, they wanted immediately to make him king. Why? Because they wanted the ultimate revolt. The ultimate war to take place, and they would fight and win against Rome.

Now this kind of attitude, this kind of constant fomenting attitude against Rome, is ultimately why the event of 70 AD happened. Finally the Romans took all they could take, and in 70 AD they came in and just wiped out Jerusalem. They killed 1,100,000 Jews. Massacred them. To stop the incessant revolt and revolution.

This is not a Godly attitude. And that's what Jesus meant when he said, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." And that's what Paul meant when he said, "Live peaceably with all men." We're not to be concerned with issues of the state and the government as a priority. We're to be busy living Godly lives as the conscience of a nation, and preaching God's word. And not starting revolutions and protesting, and making trouble.

But Roman law, for the most part, continued even during the life of Paul, in spite of all these things, to be somewhat favorable to Christianity. They frankly saw Christianity as nothing more than a sort of offshoot of Judaism. A sort of Judaistic cult if you will.

There's an interesting incident in the 18th chapter of Acts where the Corinthian Jews accused Paul of propagating an illegal religion. See, the Romans didn't allow a lot of religion, but they had legalized Judaism. So they said Judaism is legal. So when Paul came along preaching Christ, the Corinthian Jews wanted to get Paul in trouble with the Roman power, so they said, "He is preaching an illegal religion." And so they called in the pro-counsel, Gallio, to tell him that this was an illegal religion, and he paid absolutely no attention to their accusation at all. Which indicates to us that he thought of Christianity as nothing more than a few Jews disputing with other Jews about some element of theology. And because of that attitude that Christianity was just sort of an offshoot of Judaism, it gave Paul freedom in the Roman Empire to continue to preach the Gospel of Christ.

Over the next ten years his ministry could continue due to this perception. And he was able to preach. Even though Christianity truly, if understood, was not a sanctioned religion.

But looking at it from another angle, too, Christianity was to be watched. Even though they tolerated it, I'm sure they knew that it needed to be watched. After all, the Romans knew that the founder of Christianity was one Jesus, one Jesus Christ. In one reference He is called Chrestus. And that that founder was basically killed because, as far as they knew, he was claiming to be a king and offered a rival to the Caesar. So they knew there was a potential within Christianity for trouble, and so even

though they tolerated it, they watched it.

There were some Christians no doubt in some places who posed a threat to some Roman authorities. Some of them were thought to be subversive, some of them were assumed to be real troublemakers. In fact, in Acts 17, they said, "These that have turned the world upside down are come here also, and they all do contrary to the decrees of Caesar, saying there is another king, one Jesus."

So the idea that their founder was a rival king sort of followed them. But even in spite of this, there was real tolerance for Christianity. But Paul is very careful in what he says, because he doesn't want any trouble. It's possible that if they pushed a little too hard at their freedoms, if they didn't know how to respond to the Roman government, they could really be in trouble. The Romans were watching them, even though they had some freedom. The best thing for them to do was to continue to live peaceably and honorably as citizens in their society.

They were not to be associated with the Jewish mentality of insurrection, and rebellion, and revolution, all of that. So he writes this to remind them of their duty as citizens. To establish exemplary conduct, like Christ had shown. Christ had shown. Like the apostles had shown. Like the believers in the earliest part of the church had shown. They wanted to separate Christianity from insurrection as to Judaism. They wanted to affirm that Christians are good citizens. Christianity and good citizenship goes together. And good citizenship isn't just a question of not committing crimes, it's also a question of honoring and respecting, and giving dignity to those in authority over us.

So the Lord then establishes the basic principle in verse one, and it is this. Civil government, in whatever form or under whatever ruler or rulers, is to be obeyed and submitted to by Christians. A Christian has the duty to his nation, even if his ruler is a Nero or a Hitler.

You say, "Well, isn't this an isolated text?" No. I want you to look again, as we continue to lay a foundation, at I Peter 2. I Peter, chapter two. In Peter's situation, he's writing to some believers who are right at the edge of a major persecution. He's encouraging them to be ready to face what they're going to face.

Over in chapter four of I Peter, verse 12, he says, "Don't think it's strange concerning the fiery trial to test you. Rejoice," verse 13, "inasmuch as you are partakers of Christ's suffering." Verse 14, "If you are reproached for the name of Christ, happy are you." Verse 15, don't suffer as a murderer or a thief, or an evildoer, or a busybody in other men's matters, but if you suffer for a Christian, don't be ashamed. Don't be ashamed.

So he says, "Get ready. You're going to suffer." The spirit of God gives him insight to know that the persecution that's already beginning on an individual level is going to become wholesale. And so Peter is writing then to some saints who are living in a time of persecution. The wholesale persecution

hasn't yet broken out, but there is some persecution that's already started. And they need to be ready to handle it.

How do you handle it? I Peter 2:12. "Have your behavior honest among the heathen, that, whereas they speak against you as evildoers, they may by your good works, which they shall behold, glorify God in the day of visitation." In other words, they may speak of you as evil, but let it be a lie. How you going to do that? How you going to live in a society that wants to persecute you so that they see your goodness?

Thirteen, "Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man." Same thing Paul said in Romans 13:1. Same thing. "Submit to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake, whether to the king as supreme or governors or them that are sent by them for the punishment of evildoers." That would be the police. "For this is the will of God," verse 15, "that with your well-doing you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men." Foolish men are looking for something to criticize, and your lack of good citizenship and your lack of obedience to the civil authority will give them their reason.

And verse 16 says don't use your supposed freedom as a cloak for your maliciousness. I see a guy on television from time to time who curses at the leaders of our state, who uses profanity to describe the people in our state. I don't think he's ever read this passage, or if he has, he ignores it.

We're not free to do that. We're not free to be malicious. We are to honor all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. And honor the king. And even if you're a slave, "slave, be subject to your master." And take it to the end of verse 20 - patiently. So here is a persecuted group of people and Peter says to them, "Accept it, and obey your authorities."

I will never forget the conversation I had with Georgie Vince who had come from Russia after living under the tyranny of the Iron Curtain as a Christian, who's now escaped from that place. Has been to our church on several occasions, and we asked him one time in a special time we had with our staff, how it was to live in a communist country with tyranny, repression, total control - you can't go to a certain school unless the government sends you there, and they won't send you there if you're a Christian. You can't pursue a career. You can't pursue education. You're totally locked in. You have no say in the government. You have no freedoms to speak of it all.

And the question was posed to Georgie Vince, how do you approach that? He says, "We obey every law in our nation. Every law. Whether they appear to us to be just or unjust, we obey every law. Except when we are told that we cannot worship or obey the Scripture. But if we are persecuted and if we are imprisoned, and if we are killed, it will be because of our faith in Jesus Christ. Not because of a violation of some law in our nation."

Interesting. Interesting. I was interested recently to see that Svetlana went home. Did you see that? Interesting. After years and years in the freedom of America, she chose to go home. There's a certain security in home anywhere. And I guess it isn't as bad as we think it is, if you just go along with the way it is.

And Christians in any society who are willing to obey the laws and submit to those laws, as we shall see later on in Romans 13, will find it to their benefit. Now we go back to Romans 13, and we see that Paul is basically saying the very same thing that Peter is saying. We have a serious responsibility to live out our justification by grace through faith. Our self-sacrificing to the Lord as Romans 12:1-2 describes it, should make us model citizens of our nation. We should not be known as protestors. We should not be known as those who lambaste, criticize, and demean people in authority. We should speak against sin, speak against injustice, speak against evil, speak against immorality, fearlessly and without hesitation, but give honor to those who are in authority over us.

This is a biblical pattern for every age, and every nation, and every Christian. Has nothing to do with America. America didn't even exist when this was written. Obviously.

Now, the first principle given then in verse one, let's look at it, and we'll just take a look at this principle, and then we'll expand all the reasons for it. "Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers." There's the principle. It's unqualified. It's unlimited. It's unconditional. Every soul is kind of a Hebraism for every person - everybody. The emphasis is on the individual. Every individual person. We each have a very precise duty. Let's be subject is the verb. It's an imperative, hubataso. It's a military term, means to line up to take your orders. Let everyone of us get in line in submission to those who are commanding us. And who's that? The higher powers. Literally means the authorities which are over us.

The authorities that have authority over us. It's kind of a double phrase. Excuiaze, whoperic excuiaze. Authorities who have authority over us. The supreme ruling power. They're called in verse three rulers. Rulers.

The text makes no distinction between good rulers, bad rulers, fair laws, unfair laws. In fact, it is the obedience of Christians to unfair laws, the obedience of Christians to unjust rulers in the early years of the Roman Empire, the obedience of Christians through the persecutions that brought tolerance, acceptance, and finally Christianity to that same empire.

We're called then to submit, and for us it isn't that difficult really because the laws for the most part are just. They rightly represent divine truth. They're changing fast, but we are to submit. We have to face this post-Christian America, if you will, although the nation has never been a Christian nation. There aren't Christian nations. There are only Christian people. You understand that, don't you?

And though things are changing, we still have the same duty. I Timothy 2, do you remember that? Verse 1 and 2. "I exhort, therefore, that first of all supplications, prayers, intercession, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and for all that are in authority that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty, for this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior." In other words, God our Savior wants us to live a life that is peaceable. We make peace, we don't make trouble. We make peace, we don't protest. We make peace.

And we live quiet, peaceable lives in all godliness and honesty. We affect the society from the inside by changing the hearts, not the structure.

In Titus, Paul again writing to the church, "Put them in mind," he says to Titus. Put your people, all people, in mind. "To be subject to principalities and powers, to obey magistrates, to be ready to every good work, to speak evil of no man, to be no brawler, but gentle showing all meekness unto all men." That's it. Peaceable. Loving. Gentle. Meek.

It bothers me to see people in the name of Christ running around doing tirades on the leaders of our nation. No matter whether we feel they're adequate, inadequate, just, unjust, fair or unfair, there's a principle here. And it's repeated in the Scripture. We saw it in Peter, we saw it in I Timothy, we saw it in Titus, we see it here.

Now you say, "Wait a minute. You mean we're to submit to everything? Everything, everything without limitation?" No, there's one limitation. There's one limitation. And we'll deal with that and conclude our study tonight.

Look to Acts 4, and verse 13 says that the Jewish leaders heard the boldness Peter and John, and couldn't figure out how they could be so bold and so articulate when they were unlearned and ignorant men. They took note of them, that they had been with Jesus. That was evident because of their message, and because they had seen them with Him.

And so they're drawn into the counsel, and they have a little meeting. What are we going to do? The result of the meeting, verse 16, "What shall we do to these men? A notable miracle has been done by them that is manifest to all those who dwell in Jerusalem, and we can't deny the miracle. But that it spread no further among the people, let us threaten them that they speak henceforth to no man in this name." So we'll just tell them they can't speak again. They called them, commanded them not to speak at all or teach in the name of Jesus.

Now this is the government. This is the ruler. This is the authority. Even though it's the religious authority, it's authority. "Peter and John said to them 'You judge whether it's right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God.'"

Now we have a real conflict, right? God, in the form of Jesus Christ said to them go unto all the world and what? Preach the Gospel to whom? Every creature. Now the authority says don't preach. Now you have cross commands. So Peter says you tell us - who shall we obey? You or God? Fairly obvious isn't it?

The one time we have a right to disobey the authority and the government is when the government commands us not to do something God commanded us to do. Or when the government commands us to do something God commanded us not to do. Okay? When it invades that domain.

For example, if all of these laws that are suppose to be being made for the rights of homosexuals come to the point where they make demands on Grace Community Church to hire homosexuals, that's where we say sorry, you have just told us to do what God forbids us to do. We will not do that. Those are the only places where we have justification. And I hope, if it comes to that, we have the opportunity to speak loudly and clearly as to why we stand with the truth of God.

And you know what happened, don't you? Well, verse 31. They had a prayer meeting, and they were filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness. That tells you who they decided to obey, doesn't it? They weren't quiet at all. Not at all.

Same thing happened in the second persecution in chapter 5. They were told again to be quiet. To say nothing. Verse 28, "Did we not strictly command you that you should not teach in this name, and behold you have filled Jerusalem with your doctrine." They didn't obey. That accelerated their efforts.

And you intend to bring this man's blood on us? You know, part of their message was that the Jews were responsible for killing the Messiah. Peter said the same thing, along with the other apostles. We ought to obey God rather than men. That's the only time a Christian comes to the point of tension where he must violate his government. And that's what Georgie Vince meant when he said if we're in prison or if we lose our life, it will always be because of a commitment to obey the word of God. When the government calls us to do other than that.

Listen, there's no such thing as a Christian government, there has never been such thing as a Christian government, so don't assume, please will you, that Paul is writing this with a Christian government in mind. Certainly the Roman one wasn't. And there never has been one. The only Christian government that will ever be is the millennium. The millennial kingdom. But until then, all governments are flawed.

We have been privileged in our country, and I thank God for the privilege of living under the best, one of the best of human governments in the past. And we are grateful for that. That is a great privilege. And I believe God has given these 200-plus years to the United States of America in this time of

redemptive history for one specific purpose. Do you realize that for that last 200 years America has been the primary source of Missionaries for the world? Do you realize that?

And now there's a change coming about, beloved. A change. The mission's emphasis of the world I believe is turning to be a world mission emphasis. In other words, I see other countries now taking the high profile lead in sending out Missionaries. And I think that maybe - and I can't predict this - but it looks to me like our time in God's economy to be that nation that's supported by sending and by financing - you know, of course, that American church money for the most part financed the last 200 years of world missions. Our time may be done. And God will bring up a new people to send those who will reach His world.

It isn't just us. We've been there for our time, and you and I may have lived to see the diminishing of that productivity. I don't know. I don't want to guess that that's true. It seems that that appears to be on the horizon.

But there's no Christian nation. And so we're called to submit, if our government changes its form, as governments do, to be model citizens who not only obey, but who have a spirit of obedience. And give honor to those who are in authority over us. That the name of Christ might not be evil spoken of. And that the critics who are looking for ways to condemn Christians, if they're going to condemn us, please, let it be for our faith, not our political viewpoint. So we submit.

Now, immediately after that, we say why, and just so that the point is made so indelible you can't forget it, Paul gives seven reasons why we are to submit. And we're going to start with those next time. And I mean, they are powerful, powerful principles that I think are really going to have a dramatic effect on all of us.

Let's bow together in a word of prayer. Our Father, we are citizens first of all not of this world. Our citizenship is in Heaven. We know that. But even though we enjoy a citizenship with thee, we have a sense of dual citizenship, too, because we are here. And we want to be model citizens. Also, Lord, because we are in Christ, we are free. But we cannot use our freedom as a cloak of maliciousness. Even though we are free in the spiritual dimension, we must be circumscribed to the laws of the nation in which we exist, for that is the commanded Scripture. So teach us to enjoy that spiritual liberty, at the same time submitting to the laws of men given for the preservation of society.

Teach us to enjoy all that our heavenly citizenship means, and yet to live peaceably, honestly, godly, in this present world. That the world may change, not because of our effort to change its structures and forms, but because of our commitment to see its souls changed by the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Help us, Lord, as we go through these coming Sundays to see clearly what it is that Your spirit says to us, and as each new principle unfolds its rich, profound meaning to us, fill our hearts with a sense of joy in knowing more clearly how to be Your children in the midst of a crooked, and perverse generation so that we shine as lights in the world for those who dwell in darkness.

We thank You for what You're going to accomplish in our hearts, in Christ's name, Amen.

Available online at: <http://www.gty.org>

COPYRIGHT (C) 2015 Grace to You

You may reproduce this Grace to You content for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Grace to You's Copyright Policy (<http://www.gty.org/connect/copyright>).