

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

Obeying Civil Authorities

Scripture: Romans 13:1-5

Code: 80-162

A number of years ago I was invited by the Chief of Police in Los Angeles at the time, to come down to Parker Center to do a seminar with the police on leadership. All of the ranking men at Parker Center were brought in and a number of men, all the way down to the level of sergeant. We had probably about 40 men or so, 50 men, and I spent a morning with them talking about the principles of leadership. And in the process of that discussion I referred to Romans chapter 13 where it talks about those in authority, in that case the police, being ministers of God. And I talked a little bit about that amazing fact that the Bible says that those who participate in law enforcement are ministers of God.

Well I didn't really realize, you know, how it was being received by everybody but when there was a little break for a cup of coffee, one big burly kind of crusty sergeant came up to me with a cigar sticking out of his mouth, and he said to me, "You know, the part I really liked, I like the part about me being a minister of God." He said, "I'm going to use that."

Well, you know, that's really true. Those who function in civil authority are ministers of God. Turn in your Bibles to Romans chapter 13 and I want to read that passage to you and then I want to address some comment with regard to it. In Romans chapter 13 this is what the first five verses tell us:

"Let every person be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore he who resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves. For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same; for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister who brings wrath upon the one who practices evil. Wherefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience' sake."

Now let me just say in terms of general introduction that Christian living is not divisible, it is not segmentable, it is not detachable from any part of life. Our Christianity finds its way into every aspect of living. No part of life...thought, word, deed, or relationship...is unaffected by our devotion to Jesus Christ our Savior. And one of the crucial life areas where Christianity is lived out is in relation to civil government, in relation to those in authority over us. The Bible has much to say about this. The Old Testament is filled with instruction telling people to obey the law of the land and those who enforce it.

The New Testament is the same. The Apostle Paul on many occasions instructed believers to submit to the authorities, to honor the ruler, to obey the governor, to respond to those who are in authority over us.

Peter the Apostle wrote similarly in 1 Peter chapter 2 that we can silence those who criticize Christianity by our good citizenship. We are to live a righteous and a peaceable life so that the light of the gospel shines clearly through us. Christians have never been permitted to storm the castle, to revolt against the king, to kill the officials, to overtake the city hall, to defy the police, to disobey the law. That is all contrary to what the Bible teaches. No matter what the form of government, no matter what the style in which it works, we are called to respond to governmental authority.

There are only two exceptions to the universality of that command, just two. One is when government commands us to do what God forbids. Should government ever reach the point of invasion where it commands us to do that which God forbids, we cannot obey government. You remember Peter said that when they commanded him not to preach. He said we have to obey God, not men.

Secondly, we cannot do what God...what government commands us to do if God forbids us, and secondly, reversing it, we cannot do what government forbids us to do if God commands it. When they tell us to do what God told us not to do, when they tell us not to do what God commanded us to do, at that point we are disobedient. It may cost us our lives and we go to death realizing we go there in obedience to God. It may cost us our freedom and we go to prison realizing it has cost us our freedom.

In my many, many hours of talking to my dear friends in the former Soviet Union, many of whom spent ten, fifteen years in Siberian prisons because of the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ, I have asked them many, many times...what was their attitude when government came in direct conflict with the teaching of the Word of God? And their attitude was they accepted without complaint, they accepted as the will of God the fact that they would obey Him and suffer the consequences.

But apart from that most difficult circumstance, in all other circumstances we are called to submit to the government which is over us. That is crystal clear in the opening statement of verse 1 of Romans 13, "Let every person be in subjection to the governing authorities." That is the principle that this passage delineates. That is the main idea and the rest supports that idea. We are to respect authority. We are to submit to authority...authority God has designed to be society's protectors and the enforcers of civil order and law. That is no more direct in its application than when it comes to those involved in police work, whether they be Highway Patrol officers, policemen, sheriffs or any others, they actually take this design of God right down to the level of life and they are the representative authority in our lives, enforcing the order which God Himself has designed. The principle very clear...every one of us is in subjection to the governing authorities. That is as specific

as it can get.

Now following up that opening statement, Paul gives several reasons why...several reasons why. And it's quite an amazing portion of Scripture. It tells us why we are to respond to civil authority, whether it's at a national level, a state level, or a local level, whether we're talking about America, California, Los Angeles County, Los Angeles City, or any other city within this area, all the way down all of those authorities are indicted here. We are to submit to all of them and there is good reason why/

Reason number one, reason number one, authority is by divine decree. This authority is by divine decree. Notice verse 1 again. "There is no authority except from God and those which exist, those authorities which exist, are established by God." Civil authority comes directly from God.

Now when God created man and designed for man's life on the earth, basically God designed three institutions...three institutions. The first one, well-known to all of us, is the institution of marriage. God designed in the very beginning in the book of Genesis which describes the creation that a man and a woman would leave their parents and come together in a union, the two of them would constitute what we know as a marriage and out of that marriage would come a family and that is the basic unit of social life. The family is an institution of God. Marriage God called the grace of life, it is the fulfillment, it is the completion of life.

The second institution which we see throughout redemptive history we could call "the people of God." We know it as the church. In the Old Testament we see it as a covenant people Israel and now we understand it as the church. God has a people whose life He leads, controls and orders and they are in society the emblem of heaven's character. They are the symbol of heavenly life. They are the standard of righteousness in terms of morality and conduct. God has instituted a people to be salt and light in the world. He has instituted families to pass on wisdom and morality and ethics and truth from one generation to the next.

And the third and only other institution which God has ordained is civil government. And He ordained it for the protection and the preservation of social order and for the punishment of those who do evil. Civil government exists because God designed it. In fact, even when there is chaos and even when there is anarchy and even when there is rebellion and even when there are coups and sometimes they're very frequent in third-world countries, there is always the immediate tendency from that disorder and chaos to move immediately back to structure and order because chaos and the absence of social order and civil authority and government is intolerable and frightening. All things that God has created come from His hand to demonstrate His creative power and also His mind and government is one of those. While God is transcendent and He is above His creation, He is imminent in His creation but He does not just indwell the physical creation, He is not just present in the physical creation ordering it and upholding it, He is also very present in the social structure. It is God at work

in government. In a good government He is at work preserving righteousness and punishing evil. In a bad government, an abusive, oppressive, murderous, unjust government, He is at work bringing judgment and retribution upon an ungodly culture. But God is imminent, that is to say present in the social order. He is the sovereign.

We're not talking about democracy here. There's no biblical defense of that. We're not talking about aristocracy. There's no biblical defense of that. We're not talking about plutocracy. There's no biblical defense of that. Whatever the form of government, whether it is democratic, plutocratic, autocratic, whatever it is, whether it's a dictator, whether it's a democracy, whether it's a family, whether it's a dynasty, whatever it is God has ordered government as such. And what this verse says is simply that there is no authority of any kind except from God. God has created the social order.

You could put it this way. He has put in the heart of man this irrepressible desire to bring order to society. And people work so very hard at it. It's interesting to me that non-Christian people have this drive in them. Many people who have no personal relationship with the living God are in politics because they are concerned about social order. They're involved in working alongside politics. They're involved in the law profession or they're involved in police work, or whatever else it may be because they want to see some kind of order. They want to see better government, a better situation. There is that built into the fabric of human life that tends toward bringing order to chaos. And even in those places where there is no regard for the Bible, even in those nations where their religion gives no reference to Scripture at all there is still in the fabric of those religions a great commitment to order and law and a desire that that be brought into control.

In fact, we look at a Muslim world and nothing could be more antithetical to the Christian world than the Muslim world, and the more radical part of the Muslim world says that we're all infidels who ought to be executed immediately. There's nothing more different than that, and yet their world is a world of tremendous order and a world that steps in and arrests chaos much faster than ours does.

Government is by divine decree. It's in the fabric of man's desires. It's built into the warp and woof of his very nature so that he tends to fulfill that God-ordained desire. All government comes from God. No tyrant ever seized power but a sovereign God had to allow it. And somehow within the sovereignty of God it fulfills His purpose. He providentially works it to His end.

And listen, the cruel and unjust abuses in government are no reflection of God's nature. When I say that government is ordained by God, I mean as a principle. That is not to say that every government is just what God would want or is reflective of God's nature. Think of it this way. God ordained marriage, but certainly not every marriage is reflective of the character of God. In marriage you have abuse, cruelty, injustice, divorce. That does not reflect the character of God but the institution is God-ordained. And the same is true in government. Abuses do not deny the sacredness or the divine authority in any of God's institutions and government is one of them. Men abuse, frankly, all God's

gifts, don't they? All of them. It doesn't matter what they are, men abuse them all. We live in a fallen, wicked world and all men are sinners and coming short of the glory of God. And their tendency is to abuse all God's good gifts. And that's one very important reason why there is a family, to bring order to all those little chaotic creatures coming into existence. And you know as well as I do that when family order breaks down and family morality breaks down and family authority breaks down, the result is deadly to the whole culture. The same is true when government breaks down.

God has ordained government for the protection of life and property. God has ordained government for the repression of evil and crime. And God has ordained government for the rewarding of virtue and good.

Now Paul says in verse 1 there is no authority except from God and then he kind of turns it around and makes it more emphatic and more inclusive and says, "And those which exist are established by God." And who is he writing to? He's writing to people in what city? Rome. Now you certainly wouldn't want to say that that was an equitable and noble government. It was wonderful in many ways. They had brought peace because they had basically massacred all the rebels. They had advanced civilization in some places. But they could be extremely cruel. The Caesars, the story of the Caesars is a story of iniquity gone wild. It's a story of unaccountable demagoguery. It was the Romans who executed Jesus Christ before Paul ever wrote this. It would be a Roman soldier one day under the authority of Rome who would pick up an axe and chop Paul's head off, the very Paul who wrote those verses who said every government is instituted by God. That doesn't mean that what they did to Jesus Christ was a noble act, or what they did to the Apostle Paul was a righteous act. It wasn't. But the institution of government with all of its failures and abuses is nonetheless designed by God for the protection of life and property, the repression of evil and the rewarding of virtue and good.

Here then is the first reason to submit to the government. It is designed by God. God knows what our government is like. God knows what our situation is like. God has allowed it. It is His appointment and we are to submit to it. That's our responsibility.

Second point, government is by divine decree, first of all. Secondly, resistance to government is rebellion against God. Resistance to government is rebellion against God. You remember when David sinned so grossly in the Old Testament. He was up on his balcony one day and he was up there looking at other balconies, you know. And if you're the king, you have the highest balcony. He's up on his rooftop and he's wandering around looking, and over here he sees the wife of Uriah, Bathsheba, sunbathing in what might have been considered a safe place on her rooftop. He lusted after her. In the process of fulfilling his lust he committed adultery with her and murdered her husband. A crime against her, a crime against the husband. He produced in her a child which was born and then died. The dissolution of his own family came about because of his iniquity where his own son rebelled against him and pulled a corps and dethroned him from his own throne. Sad, sad

stuff all around David because of all the people he impacted.

But in Psalm 51 when he speaks about his sin, this is what he says, "Against Thee, Thee only have I sinned." The issue certainly affected Uriah, it certainly affected Bathsheba, it certainly affected his son Absalom, but most of all he had sinned against...whom?...against God because it was God who established the law. All sin against civil authority is a sin against God who put that authority there.

Look at it there in verse 2. "Therefore he who resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God." The word ordinance is institute, institution, diatage. You're really opposing God. Whoever resists...the word "resist" here has the idea of lining yourself up against. It's a military term, getting in line against, to arrange yourself to take action against. When you do that, when you resist the government, you have committed an awful crime, a crime against God Himself.

It was not consequential whether the Roman emperor was elected by the people, whether he was appointed by the senate, or whether he was placed by the military, or whether he inherited it by family. That didn't matter. It was not consequential whether the imperial authority asserted by Caesar was just or unjust, or whether Caesar was good or bad. We know his authority was often unjust and he was terribly wicked, that was not an issue. Still Paul says to the Roman Christians...submit.

It wasn't long after this until Caesar decreed that Christians should be used as torches to light the garden parties of the elite in Rome. And they poured oil on them, put them on the end of a stick like a shish-kabob and lit them afire and they burned to light the party. Such governments we think are some part of antiquity and I hasten to remind you of statistics which I recently shared with you. More Christians are being killed in the world today for their faith in Christ than at any time in history. But we are still told to submit to the government.

When I talk to those pastor friends of mine who spent time in Siberia and asked them how did they treat the government, how did they react to the government, did you ever protest, did you ever try to rebel, did you ever try an insurrection against the government? They would always say to me...We did not ever do that, we made it very clear that if ever we were arrested, if ever we were placed in jail, it would be simply and only because we preached the gospel of Jesus Christ. And for that we were willing to suffer and for nothing else, no political end.

The law gives us all kinds of room to do everything we can. We need to do that as good citizens, to effect change. But we cannot defy the law. No place for rebellion and resistance. God says it's His institution and we are to respond to it, and if we don't we are resisting God. Jesus willingly went to the cross and didn't utter a word. Paul laid his head down, they hacked it off. God is behind government, and to rebel is to rebel against Him.

A third reason, Paul says in verse 2 again, and this is very important, "They who have opposed will receive judgment on themselves," or condemnation. Here's the third reason we cannot resist authority. One, it is divinely decreed. Two, if you resist it you're literally resisting God. And three, those who resist are to be punished...those who resist are to be punished by God's design. The end of verse 2, "It's an ordinance of God and they who have opposed will receive condemnation or judgment or punishment on themselves." There is a consequence to rebellion.

The word here in the Greek is krima, it is used very often in the Bible of the judgment of God but it's just a word for judgment. And here it means the punishment of the civil authorities. The point being that God has not only ordained that social order set the standard, but listen, God has ordained that social order punish the violators. If you oppose it, you will receive condemnation on yourselves. The society must do that as a deterrent.

If you study the Old Testament, I wish we had time to go into the Old Testament, there is so much about this in the Old Testament. But there is one main law in the Old Testament that was known as lex talionis, the major law that the government used to respond to the criminal conduct and it is this law...it is stated in words like this...eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth and a life for a life. Which is repeated in a bunch of Old Testament passages. And what it means is an equitable and just treatment of the criminal. God expects punishment. And punishment had several functions. Punishment was for the sake of justice, to bring about justice, to bring about equity. Punishment was also to act as a deterrent so that the fear of that punishment would restrain people. Punishment also was to function as a part of rehabilitation. If the punishment was severe enough it would act as a corrective. Punishment by the government was also to be a prevention for private vengeance. And the Bible talks about all of those things.

There is no place in the Bible for personal, private vengeance. The government takes the role of the enforcer. It enforces it through those such as the police who have the responsibility to do just that. And for the sake of justice, the sake of a deterrent, the sake of rehabilitation, the sake of prevention of private vengeance, God ordained government to punish those who violate the law.

Just as an interesting footnote. When you get into the Old Testament, and the New, and you start to talk about how they punish criminals...one thing you'll find conspicuously absent is prisons. This is just a biblical note. There are no indications in the Bible that God endorsed prisons. Biblical law does not endorse prisons. There is an occasion in Jeremiah 37 where Jeremiah was put into a prison that was sort of made in a person's house, but as far as the Jewish people, the covenant people, the Old Testament people, they didn't use prisons.

In fact, they dealt with criminals in a very interesting way. They dealt with criminals through corporeal punishment, I mean physical punishment. They beat them. They would apply corporeal, painful

punishment. It was here and it was on and it over as a deterrent for those of the least significant crimes. For more significant crimes they involved banishment. In other words, they would just send somebody away which you find in history occurred. In fact, that's how Australia got populated. That's right. England sent all the criminals to Australia as banishment. So banishment was the other way. And then there was the extreme form of punishment for those capital crimes which the Bible outlines and that was death.

One other thing occurred. For those crimes short of capital punishment there was a system of labor that was completely related to restitution so that whatever you stole, whatever you took, whatever way you defrauded somebody you had the right to work to make sure you put that back. You restored that which brought back your own dignity. And by the way, you should be interested to know that in early America the Puritans used a more biblical approach, they used corporeal punishment and it wasn't always equitable. They used physical punishment. They used restitution through labor for lesser offenses. They used banishment. And they used execution for severe things, severe crimes. They didn't have jails really to speak of. If they had to hold a criminal for a while to await his punishment or his banishment or his execution, they generally put him in...what?...stocks. It wasn't until 1790 that the law of our land affirmed prisons. Today we have somewhere between...somewhere around three quarters of a million prisoners and the highest crime rate in the world.

Prisons can be every ineffective. They can be crime schools of all kinds. I'm not against prisons totally, I just think it's an incomplete system. God has laid out a very different approach. We only punish, by the way, about 25 out of every 500 criminals who commit serious crimes. But God has designed that government be in the punishment business...fines, imprisonments, whatever is deemed an appropriate punishment. And listen to this, any punishment enacted by society on an evil doer should be looked on as a punishment from whom? From God. That's why we can say the police and those who carry out that are instruments of God, ministers of God. Human authority punishes violators and God approves because such violation is against Him. By the way, He will also deal with the violator Himself. It's not as if the human level of punishment is all there is, God Himself by His own supernatural means may be inflicting punishment also to say nothing of that eternal punishment which awaits all those who reject His Son.

So listen, the instruments of punishment are human but the source is divine. And I tell you, beloved, when this breaks down, when this punishment principle breaks down and evil goes unpunished, you have real chaos. And you add to that the breakdown of the family where there is no moral order being enforced and the combination is volatile. The violation of God's institution of the family, the violation of God's institution of government and society is on the brink. You can only politicize so long to try to save the disaster from happening. Somewhere along the line government has to again become a stern enforcer and the family has to be reconstituted. And short of that, there's no much hope.

Fourthly, we are to submit because government is from God, authority is from God, to rebel is to rebel against God and to resist God is to bring punishment. And fourthly, government serves to restrain evil. Government punishes for the purpose of restraining evil. When punishment is effected properly it restrains evil. Verse 3, "Rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior but for evil." The point that he's making there is you don't ever have to fear the authorities if you do what is good. But if you do what's evil, authority should make you fear. You should be afraid of the authorities because they act powerfully and swiftly. The word, by the way, fear there is phobos from which we get those many phobias. It means literally terror. There should be a certain healthy fear if you're doing what is evil. You should be afraid.

But if you're doing good, you have nothing to be afraid of. Those who defy the law, those who break the law have plenty of reason to fear because government is there to create that fear. And when government and authority works the way it should work, it puts fear in your hearts. I'm not necessarily advocating this, but if I lived in Iran or Iraq I don't think I'd be a thief. You know why? They cut their hands off when they catch them. That would have an effect. There are no rapes in Ethiopia. Why? They execute them immediately. That acts as a deterrent. And that's God's design. You shouldn't be afraid if you're doing good, but if you're doing evil you should live in fear because of the strength of civil authority to act. And they should act.

When you look at what Scripture says about how they punish, it says basically three things in the Old Testament. I won't take time to go through all the passages but this is the sum of it. It says the government should act in these ways, without pity, without partiality and quickly. And that makes authority a deterrent.

Without pity, that is to say it an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a life for a life. We don't play God. We don't give grace in that sense. We want to be...we want to be loving and we want to be careful. We don't want to be abusive, but there is a law and as long as we uphold the law and we are consistent in the punishment without pity, then it becomes a deterrent.

Secondly, without partiality. Whether you're rich or poor, no matter who you are, the Bible says the law applies to all the same. And I think that's what was meant in the Constitution when it said, "All men are created equal," just as sort of a generic statement that's not true, all men are created unique would be true. We're all different. But under the law we are all...what?...equal. And that must be understood in that way.

And the third thing is the Bible is very clear and repeats it in several different places that judgment and punishment must come swiftly. Deuteronomy 25 verse 2, Ezra 7 verse 26 point that out.

And so, Paul here is just saying what is absolutely crucial to all Christians, that we are to come under governmental authority. And government has the right because it is an institution of God to punish and it is there to create fear in the hearts of those who do evil because its punishment is pitiless, impartial and swift. And when that changes...and I hate to say this but it's certainly changing in our time, judgment is anything but swift, it is interminably slow and tedious. It is anything but impartial. It tends to favor those who have more resources than those who have less. It tends to reflect all kinds of biases that come and go in every different circumstance and community. And nowadays with the redefining of everybody as a victim of something, it has more pity than it can possibly have to wield the law appropriately. But where law enforcement is without pity and without partiality and swift, it deters crime because it puts fear in the heart and fear is a restraint. And in the end that's good. Your heart grieves for those who are the victims of the law but if you let them off the hook then all is lost. This deters crime.

We submit then because government is from God, to rebel is to rebel against God. To resist God brings judgment. And government serves to restrain evil when it acts swiftly, impartially and without pity.

Number five, and we'll wrap this up. This one and one more. Government serves to promote good...government serves to promote good. It says in the middle of verse 3, do you want to have no fear of authority? You know what that means? You want to stop looking in your rear-view mirror? Do the speed limit. Do what's good. I mean, it's a simple principle, isn't it? If you're looking over your shoulder all the time, there's some reason. Do what is good and you're going to have praise of the same. They're going to thank you.

You know, I was so...so honored and so blessed to go down to City Hall, thanks to the kindness of many, including Bert Bachman(?), police commission to be honored by the city...not for myself but on behalf of our whole congregation here and realize that civil authorities were saying what they were saying to our church and the mayor came over to me and he said, "I just have one thing to ask you, don't leave this city. We need you and your church here." They will honor you when you do what is right. And that is a wonderful testimony to the ministry of this church in this city. And Joel Wachs, the councilman, told me the same thing. In fact, he kept telling me...don't leave this city, please stay, everybody leaves, don't leave. We need you and your people here.

Government serves to promote the good, to protect those who do what is right. Do what is good and they'll praise you. You know, if you want to really have an effective ministry in reaching people with the gospel of Jesus Christ, you don't rebel against the system, you do what is good within the system. First Timothy says you lead a quiet and peaceable life, you act in a righteous and godly way. Titus 3 says you don't malign the leaders, you don't take issue with them, you submit to them and you become a model citizen. And you know what? You're such a help and encouragement in the culture that they give place for you to preach the gospel. Now that sometimes changes in very hostile, anti-

Christian environments, but for the most part when we do that we silence the critics, Peter says, and we give place to the preaching of the truth.

Now, do it as good and you will have praise from the same, here it comes, verse 4, "For it, or he...could translate it either way...it, meaning civil authority; he, meaning the civil servant, the policeman...is a minister of God to you for good."

If you do what is good, you will be ministered to by one who is a minister of God for good. Isn't that an amazing thing? Now we're not talking about a preacher here, we're talking about, however, someone who is a human instrument for a divine institution. That's why we want to honor the police. That's why we want to honor those who are in authority over us because we see you as those human instruments of a divine institution for the good of our society. It says it right there, he is a minister of God to you for good.

You want protection? You want safety? You want to lead a quite and peaceful life? You want approval? You want a good reputation? He's there for that and if you do what is good he'll affirm that.

And really here's the ruler's chief purpose, here's the police's chief purpose. What does it say on the L.A.P.D. car? "To protect and serve." That's what it is, to protect those who are doing good and serve them and serve the community. He upholds the divine institution, whether or not a Christian, he is still a minister of God in that institution.

We're called then to submit. God is the source of government because to rebel is to rebel against God, because to rebel brings judgment, because government serves to cause fear to those who do evil, and because it serves to promote the good, and we certainly want to assist in promoting good, don't we?

Number six, we are to submit to government because rulers are empowered by God to inflict the severest punishment. They are empowered by God to inflict the severest punishment. Very, very severe, look at verse 4, "If you do what is evil, be...what?...be afraid." You should be afraid. Why? Because it, speaking of civil government, or he, the individual policeman, the one who is responsible for the enforcement, the sheriff, whoever he be, does not bear the sword for nothing. Pretty severe. I'm going to ask you a question, what were swords used for? Spanking people? I don't think so. Wrapping them in the knuckles? No. They were used for...what?...killing them. Here again the Scripture gives civil authority the sword of execution. He doesn't carry that sword for nothing, he carries it to use it. He's a minister of God. Civil government is an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil. You practice evil, God says they have every right to bring about your death under those most severe crimes.

Let me tell you, folks, authority is not a pageant. It's not just symbolic. It's real. It is not a weak threat. It is not a symbol of power. Government has the power to take away life and it is to execute that power. It is not given the sword for nothing, it is given the sword to use it. Genesis 9:6 says, "By whom man's blood is shed shall his blood be shed," right? And all throughout the Old Testament it says when someone murders someone and justice is not meted out, the ground cries out with the blood. It started with Cain and Abel. Cain killed Abel and Cain went along living his life and the blood of Abel cried to God from the ground.

You remember in Matthew chapter 26 Peter, impulsive Peter, the Apostle was in the garden, the Roman soldiers came to take Jesus to execute him and here come all these Roman soldiers and Peter standing there and in a moment of great courage and confidence that Jesus would probably bail him out if he got into real trouble, he grabbed a sword and started to hack his way through the Romans. He started with the first guy in line who was Malchus who happened to be there with the high priest, a servant of the high priest, he tried to chop his head off, Malchus ducked and lost an ear. Jesus gave him back an ear and said, "Peter, if you live by the sword, you will...what?...you die by it." What was He saying? You take somebody's life, the government has a right to take your's. Jesus affirmed capital punishment.

It certainly a terrible, terrible tragic thing but it is a restraint. There would be a lot less innocent people dead if there were more guilty people dead. That's a terrible thing to have to say but that's the biblical law. If you execute the murderers swiftly, without partiality, and without pity, the restraint is in place. The sword was the instrument of execution. Paul says in Acts 25, he's talking to Felix...to Festus the Roman governor, and he says..."If I've...if I've done such an enormous crime, I do not hesitate to die." In other words, he recognized capital offense. He hadn't done anything but he said if I had done that I'm willing to die, I'll take my punishment if I commit that crime. That was just standard fare. And the authority that wields that is the minister of God. Again it says a minister of God with a sword of execution who brings wrath upon the one who practices evil. God knows you can't purify a society unless you remove the evil doers who are the most heinous criminals. It's a terrible thing, the whip, the cell, the noose, the guillotine, the electric chair, the gas chamber, horrible things. But do we mitigate all of that and watch the innocent perish at the hand of the guilty?

Well, they have the sword and they don't have it for nothing. Numbers 35:33 says, "Where there is murder and no justice on the murderer, the land is polluted." And I think when you think about the bankruptcy, the moral bankruptcy of our society, you see the devastated shattered homes, that's where it all starts, criminals being produced in the absence of any leadership, any authority, any affirmation, any moral absolutes. You see it in the breakdown of the system that no longer wants a proper punishment and so there's no deterrent. Disregard for the sanctity of human life, the abolition of the death penalty, just sort on the top of all of it in many states, usually being advocated by the same people who promote abortion, I think, what confusion.

One final point, when all that is said and done, there's one last comment that Paul makes about why we submit to government and it's in verse 5. He says, "Wherefore it is necessary to be in subjection not only because of wrath but also for conscience' sake." Boy, that's so good, I wish I had time to talk about it.

You know, you talk about government is powerful and authoritative and it has the right to punish and it has the power of the sword and we all ought to live under fear, and that's part of it. We need that. We need...I wish...I wish that it were true that we could all just be encouraged on the positive side and we'd all comply, but it doesn't work like that. We have to have fear to restrain our aberrant wickedness as fallen people.

But there is another side and he says, on top of all of that, just do what is right for conscience' sake, just for the peace and tranquility and joy of a good conscience. We have people in our society troubled, troubled, troubled, troubled deeply. Why? Guilty conscience, guilty conscience. Who wants that? If you had the choice to have an accusing or an excusing conscience, which would you take? I'd rather have a clear conscience, wouldn't you? I'd rather be like Paul and say my conscience is clear. Do what's right just for a clear conscience. Obey the laws just for a clear conscience, just so you don't have to deal with the abuse your conscience is going to give you when it hammers you for your disregard for what is right. Just live under the law of God and the law of the land, be obedient to those over you, be obedient to God just for the peace it brings, just for the joy in your heart it brings, just because you know it's right and it's wonderful to live in the knowledge that you're doing what you know is right.

Well, thus government is honored, civil authority is lifted up, the police are called ministers of God, they have a tremendous, tremendous duty and a tremendous privilege. And we respect them and honor them for that. And I want to say, too, and I think I have to say this in closing, in many ways I feel sorry for what many of you go through in law enforcement because so much of this you know in your heart and believe and are committed to and that's why you're there, and yet the system is not acclimated to this. And so you work so hard to achieve these goals which you believe are so important and the disappointments mount up as the system itself breaks down, homes break down and your work is somehow undone.

Well if I can encourage you, understand this, that you are nonetheless the minister of God and it is a noble thing that you do on His behalf. Let's bow in prayer.

Father, we thank You for this time this morning to consider this portion of Scripture and to thank those who literally put their life on the line for matters such as these. We thank You for those who are a part of that ministry which You have ordained for civil order. I would pray, first of all, Lord, for their relationship with You that they would know You, the only true God, through Jesus Christ Your Son,

that they would know the God whose institution they uphold, that they would know Him personally through faith in Jesus Christ. I pray, Lord, that they might come to the recognition of their own sin and the sacrifice of Christ as their Savior and accept the forgiveness He gives and embrace Him as Lord and thus come to know You and to enter into that eternal life which You give to all who put their faith in Your Son.

And then I pray, Lord, that You would use them as Your instruments to bring about order for Your glory for the well being of man and for the expansion of Your church and the spread of Your truth. We thank You, Lord, for the fact that Your Word speaks to all the issues of life and we thank You for what a treasure it is to us. And most of all we thank You for Yourself and Your work in our hearts and we give You the glory in Christ's name. Amen.

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