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Romans Bible Study (The Righteousness of God Revealed)

Romans 13:1-7, The Christian and Government

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Chapter 13 builds an interesting transition to Paul's instructions. Chapter 12 concluded with Paul instructing Christians to not repay evil with evil. Instead, let God take care of it. God will bring justice and he will repay. Further, we are to do good to our enemies, knowing that God will set everything right on the day of judgment. But after talking about how individuals are not to repay but to leave room for God's wrath, Paul is going to instruct that the government does execute wrath. Individuals do not repay, but the government does.

Submit To The Government (13:1-2)

Paul's command is to "every person." "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities." Governing authorities refer to all who exercise legitimate authority. We have talked in many lessons about what it means to submit. I think an appropriate synonym is "yield." We are going to yield to the governing authorities. We yield to law enforcement. We yield to the cities that we live in and the laws they have. I think it is completely ridiculous to have to pay the city of Royal Palm Beach for a sign that allows me to have a garage sale. I thought we lived in the United States of America where my property is my property. But I am to yield to the governing authorities. So when we have had a garage sale, we paid the

fee to the city. We must yield to the Palm Beach County authorities. The ordinances and laws that exist in this county must be followed. The traffic lights in this county drive me nuts. Only a handful are on a trip system. Nearly all of them are on timers. There is nothing more thrilling than sitting at a stop light that is cycling through every We must yield to the laws of the state of Florida. All the laws and rules placed on us by the state we are to obey. We must obey our national government with all of its laws. Being subject to the governing authorities should not cause us to think of only yielding to the federal government. We are subject to many governing bodies and legitimate forms of authority.

The reason we are to yield to the governing authorities is because there is no authority apart from God and God has instituted the authorities that exist. The authority that governments exercise are delegated to them by God. This is a point the scriptures have made in a number of places.

When Daniel interpreted Nebuchadnezzar's dream about the king's future humiliation, he said:

The sentence is by the decree of the watchers, the decision by the word of the holy ones, to the end that the living may know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will and sets over it the lowliest of men. (Daniel 4:17 ESV)

Also, remember the discussion between Jesus and Pilate.

He entered his headquarters again and said to Jesus, "Where are you from?" But Jesus gave him no answer. So Pilate said to him, "You will not speak to me? Do you not know that I have authority to release you and authority to crucify you?" Jesus answered him, "You would have no authority over me at all unless it had been given you from above. Therefore he who delivered me over to you has the greater sin." (John 19:9–11 ESV)

God has given the authority to these ruling and governing bodies. This leads to a natural conclusion in verse 2. Do not resist the governing authorities because God has given the authority. God has delegated authority to these entities. If we resist, then we are resisting what God has established and will incur judgment. I think a necessary conclusion to draw that Paul is stating is that we are not to engage in civil disobedience. We are not to break the laws. We do not have the right to determine if there are laws that we do not like and therefore can break them. We are subject to these ruling authorities and we are to yield to them. We will talk a bit more about this at the end of the lesson, but I think it is very important to notice that there are not exceptions to this command. Paul does not qualify this command at all. We are to be in submission to the governing authorities.

God's Purpose In Government (13:3-5)

Paul continues that governments are not exist as a terror to good conduct, but to bad conduct. Governing authorities rule so as to be able to deal with those who engage in bad conduct. Do good and do not resist the governing authorities and you should have nothing to fear. The government operates as God's servant for your good. Paul teaches us that the government's role is to protect the innocent and those who have good conduct and execute wrath on the wrongdoers. Verse 4 continues to prove this thought. If you do wrong, be afraid of the governing authorities because these authorities do not bear the sword in vain. God gave power to the governments and these authorities are expected to use that power. It should be fairly clearly to us that "bearing the sword" is a picture of capital punishment. God has given the power of the sword to the governing authorities and God expects them to use that sword to defend those who have good conduct and to "carry out God's wrath on the wrongdoer." These authorities are to be acting as God's servants. Please notice that Paul says that the government is "an avenger who carries out God's wrath." Remember that Paul instructed individuals to not seek vengeance (12:19), but to leave room for the wrath of God. God's wrath is not only found at the end on the day of judgment, but also through the government who acts as an avenger carrying out God's wrath.

Therefore, according to verse 5, we subject ourselves to the governing authorities not only to avoid the sword that the government bears but also to be in obedience and subjection to God. We submit to avoid the wrath of the governing authorities and because it is right in the sight of God. I think it is important to observe something here. Paul's commands are not contingent on living in a democracy or living in a system of capitalism. These are universal rules, given for Christians who live in communist China, who lived in the former Soviet Union, who live in Cuba, who live in Zimbabwe or South Africa, or any other time or place. These laws were in effect and given to Christians who lived under the power of Emperor Nero under the might of the Roman Empire. These laws are not contingent on liking where we live or agree with the policies or spending habits of the government.

I am disturbed by how I see Christians acting based upon the policies and legislation of our governments. There is no doubt that there are going to be things that we do not agree with, things that are matters of opinion and judgment. There is also no doubt that the governments are going to do things that are immoral and sinful. But none of these things changes these commands. At no point are we allowed to stop living and acting like Christians just because we like or do not like what our government does. What if our government ended up where one person was in total control and could wield unchecked power on the masses? What if this figure could be unjust, letting evil go free and killing the innocent on a whim? What if he could raise our taxation to the point that we barely had a few dollars to

live on? Do we think we would have the right to rebel? What I have described is the condition of the Roman Empire in the first and second centuries. Paul wrote these words under those difficult times. We must stop thinking that these commands are for us when the government keeps to the Constitution or keeps to what we think it ought to do. Paul commanded submission to the governing authorities, whether we like who is in charge or the policies the government enacts.

Pay Taxes (13:6-7)

Further, Paul commands very clearly that we must pay taxes to the governing authorities, whether we like or agree with the taxes or not. I am not sure exactly how there have been Christians who thought they did not have to pay taxes because the money was used for wickedness or disagreeable things. As if the taxation of the Roman Empire was used for printing Bibles. It is interesting that Paul had to command this because it appears that even Christians in the first century doubting the morality of paying taxes. But verse 7 is very clear. We are to pay to all the governing authorities what is owed to them. Taxation under the Roman Empire was crushing as the money was used to fund wars and conquests. Do not forget that taxation was crushing under king Solomon in the Old Testament, and even worse under his son, Rehoboam. Paul does not say to pay taxes only when we agree with the amount of taxes or what the taxes are used for. Pay taxes to whom taxes is due. Give revenue to whom revenue is owed. Give respect to whom respect is owed and honor to whom honor is owed.

I have another great concern that Christians do not respect and honor the governing authorities. I have seen horrifying things on Facebook from Christians along these lines. For example, here is one that I saw:

"Dear Lord, this year you took my favorite actor, Patrick Swayzie (sic). You took my favorite actress, Farah (sic) Fawcett. You took my favorite singer, Michael Jackson. I just wanted to let you know, my favorite president is Barack Obama. Amen."

Now I get the humor because of how the logic of the joke works. But we better be extremely careful about desiring for a person to be dead. Paul commanded honor and respect to the governing authorities. Peter commanded it also.

Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor. (1 Peter 2:17 ESV)

Let me drive the point home further. Would Christians have enjoyed this joke and posted this joke about the previous president? We are not acting like Christians but are tying our citizenship far too deeply to

this world and to this country.

Civil Disobedience

Finally, let me return to the thought of civil disobedience before we close. We noted that Paul does not qualify these commands. We are to submit to all the governing authorities because they are given their authority by God. However, there are examples of followers of God disobeying the commands of government. I would be remiss to not note those instances. We know that Rahab resisted the commands of the government to turn over the Israelite spies. We know that the Hebrew midwives disobeyed the command of Egypt to take the male child born and throw them into the Nile River. In Acts 5 the Sanhedrin, a governing authority of the nation of Israel, gave this command and the following response by the apostles.

"We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man's blood upon us." But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than men. (Acts 5:28–29 ESV)

Therefore, we learn that there is one qualification to Paul's command to submit to the governing authorities: **The law commanded for us to perform directly violates God's law.**

This is an important line. The line is not that what our government is doing breaks God's law because every government does this. So did the governments in the first century. So did God's ordained government in the nation of Israel. But disobedience was not legislated. The only time we must not submit is if the government passes a law that compels me to break God's law. The law to kill the male babies directly violated God's law to not murder. The law to hand the spies over to the Jericho authorities directly violated God's command as these men were sent by God and Rahab knew this. The command of the Sanhedrin to no longer speak about Jesus directly violated God's command to preach the good news of Jesus to the whole world.

Perhaps a modern example would be useful. Spanking is a useful illustration. There are eighteen countries in the world that have made it illegal to spank (including Sweden, Denmark, Austria, Italy, and Norway). France is attempting to pass the same legislation. In Canada a parent can only spank between the ages of 2 and 12. In 2007 California and Massachusetts attempted to pass a law prohibiting parents from spanking. If our state or our country passes such a law, I will break that law and I will teach parents to break that law. At risk to myself, I will do as God commands.

Whoever spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him. (Proverbs 13:24 ESV)

Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline drives it far from him. (Proverbs 22:15 ESV)

Do not withhold discipline from children; if you punish them with the rod, they will not die. Punish them with the rod and save them from death. (Proverbs 23:13–14 TNIV)

The rod and reproof give wisdom, but a child left to himself brings shame to his mother. (Proverbs 29:15 ESV)

Conclusion:

1. Submit to all governing authorities because God has delegated power to them.
2. Governments have the right for capital punishment to execute wrath on wrongdoers and protect the innocent.
3. Pay taxes; respect and honor these authorities.

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